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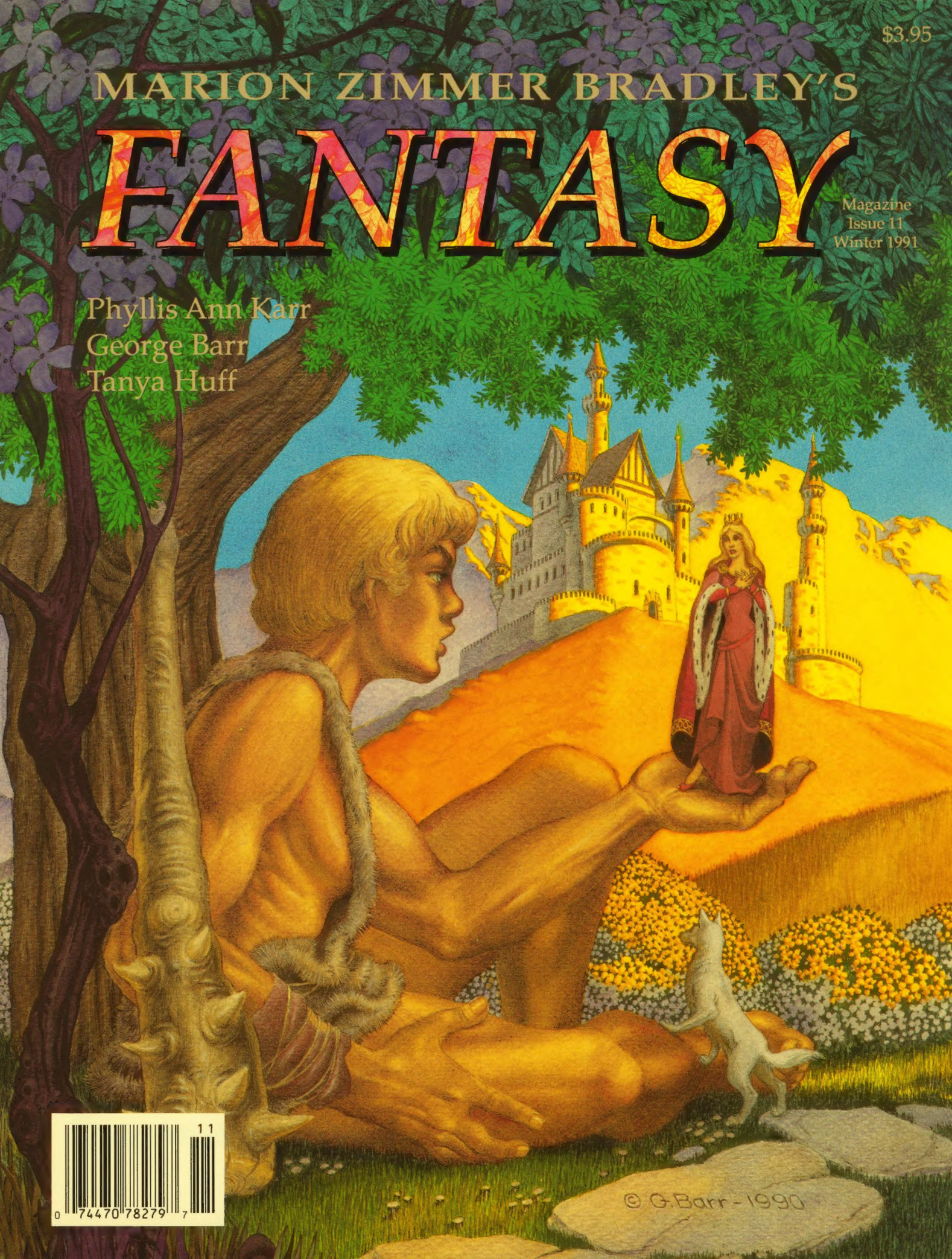
MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S

FANTASY

Magazine
Issue 11
Winter 1991

Phyllis Ann Karr
George Barr
Tanya Huff



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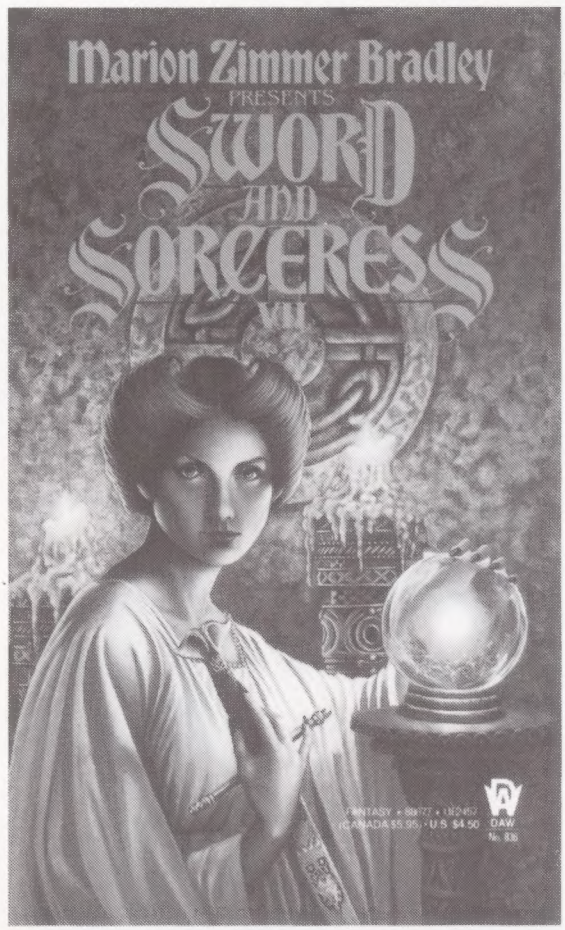

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Issue #11 – Winter 1991 – Vol. 3 No. 3

MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S
FANTASY MAGAZINE
Marion Zimmer Bradley, Ltd.
P.O. Box 245-A
Berkeley, CA 94701
(415) 601-9000

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SUBSCRIPTIONS: Individual subscriptions are $14.00 for 4 issues in the U.S., $20.00 in Canada, $30.00 for foreign subscriptions. Make all checks payable to: Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine. All subscriptions, including Canadian, are payable directly in U.S. funds only. Individual copies are $3.95 plus shipping charges, which are: U.S. $1.00, Canada $2.00, foreign $5.95.

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MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S
FANTASY
Magazine

Fantasy vs. Disney

Everybody nowadays says they are familiar with "The Little Mermaid". What they really mean is, they have seen the Disney version of "The Little Mermaid". Any resemblance to the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale of the same name is purely coincidental – there's a mermaid in each; that's about all the resemblance I can find.

The same thing is true of the Italian fairy tale "Pinocchio", and of the first and best of the Disney animated epics, "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs". Having seen this one when I was seven years old, I'm very fond of it, and it did have good music–not to be compared with the elevator music in Disney's "Little Mermaid", which contains no single memorable song. On the other hand, being all of eleven when I saw "Pinocchio", and about eighteen when I saw "Sleeping Beauty", I still prefer the originals.

Here I will delete several pages of self-justifying pop psychology while Disney addicts explain why it was necessary to omit, for their kiddie audience, the more frightening elements – but they never explain why the witch in "Snow White", or Monstro the Whale, are allowed to be too frightening for three-year-olds.

I think myself it is the American climate which insists the kids must be "protected" from anything as real as death or a serious moral choice. Which is one of the reasons our society's so much of a mess. A lot of people say, "Leave it to the schools". But the schools sren't doing it. Nobody is – except maybe us.

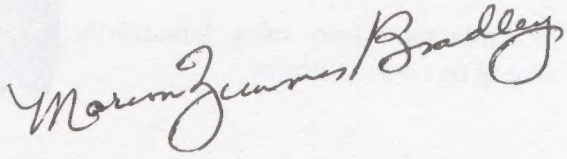
While the average Victorian child had eight or nine brothers and sisters – of whom three or four died before they were five – it is not uncommon for a modern American to reach 45 or 50 before even confronting a death in the family. The first death I really knew all that much about – even though I had a brother who died when I was eight – was my father's death when I was 48. I recently received a letter from a well-meaning New Ager who told me after my heart attack that I must simply "refuse to accept death" – in which case I would presumably live forever. No thanks. Boring. I remember too well what happened to the Struldbrugs in GULLIVER'S TRAVELS – significantly omitted from the cartoon movie made in the fifties. (They aged but never died.)

Why are we, as a society, so unwilling to confront the facts of death? The truth of the matter is still that no one gets out alive. An old joke has a newcomer asking the death rate in a village; whereupon someone says, "Same as everywhere else – one to a customer."

Granted, science is achieving wonderful things. But if nobody ever died, there'd be no room for improvement.

Victorians believed they had achieved the Best of All Possible Worlds. So they set themselves to eliminate the one fly in the ointment: death. And we're still living with that attitude.

We usually don't use fairy tales. For this issue we do – and we hope you get something the Disney movies won't give you.



MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S

Fantasy Magazine

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Brontharn

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by George Barr

Art by George Barr
Cover Art by George Barr

A beautiful sad story dealing with a princess and a giant. We'll guarantee you haven't read this one before.

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by A. Orr

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Editor's note: Issue #11 really is our winter 1991 issue, no matter what the rest of the pages say.

BRONTHARN
GALBOR
GUTWORT
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Brontharn

By George Barr

His Highness, Prince Derro Silverlance, of the Kingdom of Fairland!"

The herald's staff rapped the requisite three times on the black slate floor, sending echoes about the great hall despite heavy draperies overhanging the cold stone walls, and the buzzing throng of courtiers assembled for the—by now—familiar occasion.

Amberly sat straight in her throne, her face carefully expressionless, as the latest suitor descended the stairs.

Prince Derro, unlike so many who had presented themselves in the two years Amberly had been of marriageable age, was not bedecked in regal splendor. His bearing was regal enough; he didn't need brocades and jewels to convince anyone he was of royal birth. He wore a simple black tunic over grey hose, girded with a broad, silver-studded belt, and had a deep red woolen cloak thrown back over one shoulder.

He didn't swagger, nor did he appear conscious at all of the court about him. His manner seemed less a performance than simply natural behavior.

Princess Amberly's first impression was that he was striking. But as he approached, she amended that to strikingly *handsome*. Prince Derro Silverlance was the hero of every maiden's dream made flesh.

If she accepted his suit her father would be pleased. Fairland was wealthy; it would be a good marriage and a profitable alliance. She would be envied by all the girls of the court . . . and, truth to tell, many of the married ladies as well.

She might even—in time—learn to care for him. If good looks could only guarantee happiness, she should be in heaven, for he was certainly the most dashingly beautiful of all the men who'd come seeking her hand.

She wished it were that easy . . . that she could simply nod, smile, and let it all be over.

If only she could . . .

If only she'd not asked for her father's promise.

She'd been fourteen and it was her birthday. Before the entire court her doting father had asked if she had some special birthday wish he might grant.

"Yes," she'd replied boldly, "but you *wouldn't* grant it."

"Why?" he laughed. "Would it cost me the crown jewels?"

"No," she said. "It would require you to break custom, and you wouldn't do it."

Her father had seemed hurt that she'd think him so hard-hearted. "My darling," he said, drawing her close, "I give you my word. I cannot relinquish my crown, nor set May day into June on your whim, but what I can do to make you happy I will do most willingly."

Amberly had looked about at the smiling court. They were imagining she wanted some childish fantasy like a formal ball she—at fourteen—would be allowed to attend, an out-of-season hunt, or a harvest fair in the middle of summer. They all saw her as her father did: a girl who'd been pampered and indulged, with little imagination and no reason for ambition. And they were right . . . partly. She *had* been pampered, and she really *didn't* aspire to much beyond her already royal position.

But Amberly remembered her sister who, three years before, had come closer than anyone else realized to taking poison when she'd been married off against her will to a man she neither knew nor loved. Amberly had seen her despair and lived in horrified anticipation of sharing her sister's fate.

"Father," she said, "I want only your promise that when it comes time for me to be wed, you will allow *me* to choose my husband. I will try to make a good marriage, but I'd rather live a spinster all my life than marry a man I do not love. Will you do that for me, as you have promised . . . or is it too much for a daughter to ask of her father?"

He might have reneged on his vow had it not been made in front of the entire court. Even so, there were many who'd have understood... perhaps all. But King Leonus Ironhelm was a proud and honorable man; he stood by his word lest anyone accuse him of being untrue, even to a child.

There'd have been no problem. There were plenty of suitors...many who set hearts fluttering throughout the castle. And Amberly would surely have been smitten by one or another of the fine handsome men who presented themselves before her.

Except for that promise, Amberly's fate would have been out of her hands. Her father would long since have given her to a worthy prince of a rich kingdom. She'd have hated it . . . just as much as her sister had . . . but she'd have lived with it. Generations of women since time began had endured such arranged marriages and managed somehow to find a measure of fulfillment in their lives. Her own mother had not been entirely unhappy.

But Amberly had been given the right to choose for herself, and she could make no choice.

Not ever ...

... because she was in love, and it was an impossible love. Not that law forbade it; such laws had not even been *imagined*, let alone enacted. She might as well request permission to wed a pine tree or a mountain peak. She'd have as much chance for acceptance, a family, and happiness.

Two years before Prince Derro Silverlance of Fairland entered the audience hall of King Leonus Ironhelm to seek the hand of a young princess, that princess—bored with her samplers, her dolls, and her ladies-in-waiting—had indulged in a secret pleasure she'd shared with no one: she'd gone exploring.

She left the castle by way of a tunnel hidden behind her great-great-grandfather's crypt, deep within the mountain. It was a way known only to the members of the royal family, dug generations ago as an ultimate means of escape in case of a siege.

She spoke to almost no one for fear her education might betray itself in her speech and give her away. It made such explora-

tions more secretive and exciting to imagine herself a spy or a sorceress bent on some secret and dangerous mission.

In rough dress of homespun and a shawl to hide her bright hair, Amberly had become acquainted with most of the lanes and byways within half a day's walking distance. She knew the shops, the inns, the mill, the smithy, even the brothels.

There'd been no war for nearly a century. Amberly herself was the only member of the family—so far as she knew—who'd ever actually made use of the passage. It wasn't the most pleasant place in the world...dank, dark, filled with rustlings and eerie echoings.

Twenty paces beyond the crypt, the man-made tunnel connected with a natural limestone cave which honeycombed the mountain. There were numerous dark, unexplored branches leading away from the main passage, and many small openings in the steep mountainside which let in faint daylight occasionally to give glimpses of chambers she was certain were full of bats and thick with spider webs.

Amberly had always kept to the well-defined trail which led down to a small waterfall. There she was required to crouch low, squeeze through a small crevice, and push aside thorny brush which grew thickly about the stream.

But once past this there was a mountain trail to the village. It was an outing which took most of the day, so the princess didn't take it unless she was fairly certain she would not be missed.

On this fateful occasion she had known her father would be involved with envoys from a neighboring kingdom, and she was bored enough that she didn't much care if her ladies-in-waiting were distressed at not finding her. She dressed carefully, stole a torch from a sconce in the crypt, and moved slowly into the hand-hewn tunnel.

Though she carried tinder, she always waited to light the torch until she emerged from the tight passage. In such cramped quarters, she disliked its smoke and stench. Feeling her way along the rough stone, she had no fear of being lost, as there were no branches until she reached the cave. She could easily determine when she'd arrived there by the change in the texture of the wall.

The tunnel, upon merging with the cavern, joined first a natural passageway between the solid mountain and a fretted screen of limestone which had formed over the countless ages. Slim columns had descended in a straight line from a crack in the stone overhead, meeting with others arising from the floor. Close together, they'd branched, spread, filled in, and created a delicate network of lacy stone. Water still dripped over it, gradually filling in the openings with minute deposits of dissolved minerals.

Upon entering this narrow hallway, Amberly became aware of two things. First: the morning sun through the porous face of the cliff made the torch unnecessary. The light was dim, but sufficient. Second: there was a sound she'd not heard before... something more than the dripping water and the rustling of bats. It was like heavy breathing... almost snoring.

Cautiously she crept forward. Sound was deceptive in the cavern. Echoes made it difficult to discern the direction of a noise. What she heard might be a bear or simply an amplified reflection of her own breath.

With the sunlight behind it, the stone screen had become a translucent veil pierced with tiny bright holes. It was beautiful and seemed somehow magical. Delicate traceries of subtly glowing color wound through it.

Never having come through this early before, Amberly had not been aware of the beauty of the cave. She'd seen it only lit by the light of a smoking torch, looking dangerous and forbidding, filled with deep holes and ominous pillars which looked like shrouded statues.

Carefully she leaned forward and with one eye peered through a small hole in the stone. The scene which met her gaze was unreal ... dreamlike... enchanted.

Water, dripping from the ceiling, caught the light and sparkled like jewels. Light, like that in a cathedral, filled the air, reflecting softly from wet stone. A few larger openings, straight enough to admit pure sunlight, formed slanting beams of radiance filled with dancing motes and falling gems.

The sound of water, so eerie in darkness, seemed suddenly like music... fairy music to match the enchantment of the moment.

But it didn't mask the soft sound which had urged her to extra caution.

Then she saw, in a recess across the cavern, a slight movement. A young man lay there, apparently asleep. Though muscular of build, his face seemed that of a boy ... not handsome, exactly, but open and appealing. He was nearly naked, wearing only a brief garment which looked to be made of the skins of many small animals sewn crudely together.

Leaning against the wall beside him was a club: a gnarled, thorny, quite dangerous-looking length of tapered wood at least half his height. That—and the skins he wore—gave an appearance of savagery and barbarism very much at odds with the untouched innocence of his face.

His hand moved. Evidently not soundly asleep, he caressed a small grey-furred animal curled up at his side.

A mouse, she thought, enchanted at the sweetness of it. *He has a pet mouse.*

Then the little animal raised its head to sniff the air. To her utter astonishment it was not a mouse at all . . . nor anything remotely related to a mouse. The boy's pet was the tiniest dog she'd ever seen. It was not a puppy; its proportions were those of a full-grown dog. In fact, it looked very like a wolf, yet was small enough that he could have carried it curled in the palm of his hand.

It sniffed again and its head turned to stare directly toward her. Though it couldn't possibly see her, its nose wrinkled as it bared its white teeth in a snarl.

Not wishing to alarm the young man, Amberly moved quickly along the trail until she'd emerged from behind the limestone screen.

Suddenly disoriented, the girl stared in amazement.

Having peered through the hole in the stone with only one eye, she'd had no immediate way to guess the distance across the cave. Now in the open, she saw that the cavern was larger than she'd remembered. It was *immense.* Between her and the skin-clad stranger stretched a floor as vast as the great audience hall of the castle, though not so neatly paved. There were formations like great tree trunks rising out of deep pools of crystal clear water... hills, hollows, and ravines.

She screamed involuntarily as her foot slipped into a narrow crevice and wedged tightly.

The little wolf stood up, growling, and launched itself toward her as the young man blinked and peered after it.

For what seemed an incredibly long time the snarling, grey-furred creature

bounded across the cavern. And her mind balked at accepting what she saw.

It was *distance*... the distance across that huge chamber... that had made the wolf seem so small. It was anything *but* small as it approached. It was a full-sized beast of the forest, as large as any the castle huntsman had ever brought in.

And that meant... no, it was beyond belief! But it was true! The young man she'd assumed was a lost child of the woods was in reality a creature out of myth. He scrambled to his feet to follow the wolf, and with each long stride loomed ever larger to her horrified gaze.

He stood fully *six times* the height of a normal man.

In this cave beneath her home lived a *giant*! In all the nursery tales, never had she heard of one so huge. He could devour a human being as quickly and easily as a man might eat a rabbit... take off a head in a single bite.

"Galbor!" the giant shouted, his voice filling the chamber, reverberating from the stone walls, terrifying the princess with its immensity. Such a voice could never have emerged from a human throat. The great heraldic trumpets in the gate towers did not sound with such depth and resonance.

The wolf stopped... evidently well trained to its master's commands. Mere feet away from her, its yellow eyes seemed to burn into Amberly's. Its pink tongue, dripping, licked its black lips. But it did not attack.

In moments the giant had covered the distance to arrive beside his pet. He knelt and bent toward the princess, who felt her bones turn to water.

So close, and so huge, the great being's face still managed to retain that look of boyishness which had so charmed her. "Who are you?" the giant asked, his voice soft ... like whispering thunder. "And what are you doing here in Carrowyn?"

"Carrowyn?" she said, astonished that the huge man would speak a language she could comprehend . . . and suddenly hopeful that she might survive this day. If he spoke, she reasoned, he had a mind. Intelligence. He'd spent time in converse with others... others who were akin to her, at least in that they spoke the same tongue.

"Carrowyn," he repeated, then gestured sweepingly to encompass the entire cavern. "This is Carrowyn... the ancestral home of my people."

"*My* home is atop this mountain," she replied. "My father rules this land."

"Aaah," he said, nodding. Sitting back on his heels, he seemed lost in thought.

Taking advantage of his diverted attention, Amberly cautiously extricated her foot from the crevice and prepared to dart back behind the limestone curtain and into the tunnel. The wolf, perhaps, might follow, but the giant surely could not.

"If your father rules," he said, leaning forward again, "then he is a *king*, is he not? I've heard of kings. You are then a . . . *princess*?"

"Yes," she admitted, wondering if she would be held for ransom, "the youngest of three. I am Amberly, daughter of King Leonus Ironhelm and Princess of Carin. This is the land of *Carin*, not Carrowyn."

Again the giant nodded. "It has been many ages since my people lived here. Long before you little ones came, this mountain was ours, and this cavern our home. We called it Carrowyn then. That was before I was born. Carin is not so different... *smaller* ... like you."

"I came back to see it, to see if the

legends were true."

Despite his immense size, and the presence of the slavering grey wolf which obeyed his command, Amberly no longer felt afraid... and was surprised at the realization.

"How many of you are there?" she asked. "There's been no rumor of giants in these mountains. None at all."

The huge being looked for a moment like a forlorn child. "I came alone. If there are others of my people still living, I don't know where they'd be. My father died beneath an avalanche before I was born. And my mother... " His face hardened. "My mother was slain by a brave knight when I was but a toddler. I've been told your people still tell tales of heroism in conquering the Ogress of Kerrywood Fen. I am her son: Brontharn . . . perhaps the last of all my kind."

Amberly gasped. "It is an old tale. No one really believes it. It was supposed to have happened over *a hundred years ago*. How can you be her son?"

Brontharn spread his hands... each big enough to grasp her like a puppet... and she shrugged. "I don't know how many years ago it was. We are a long-lived people. I have barely reached my full growth, and have not yet grown a beard. My father had a beard almost to his waist, I was told, and he was over two hundred years old when he died... and not yet grey. I really don't know how long we're supposed to live. There's no one left to ask."

He sounded so lonely that, had he been nearer her size, the princess would have put an arm around him to comfort him. But she could hardly have encircled his ankle with *both* her arms.

Such gestures were to imply that the one embraced was more protected and secure. The thought should have been funny in this situation, but Amberly did not feel like laughing. She felt deeply the giant's isolation.

On the visits that followed, the princess heard how Brontharn had been led as a child to the great forests in the south by an old dwarf named Gutwort. He had raised the colossal boy—as well as possible—as his own.

Old Gutwort, being about half human height, had been able to move among men without too much trouble and had learned much of their doings, their history, and their legends. All this he'd taught to his young charge, as well as what he knew of the giants themselves.

Isolated from both their kind, visited only occasionally by forest gnomes, and encountering on rare instances a fairy or an elf, their life was lonely and hard. They'd lived on wild boar and elk. There was little else big enough to feed Brontharn, and gathering sufficient food for the growing giant had not been easy. But it had not been a totally unpleasant experience.

He'd learned from Gutwort how his mother had stained her fair face with pitch, strung moss in her long hair, then gibbered and wailed to frighten men out of Kerrywood Fen. But the ruse had worked against her when she became legendary, and the object of knightly quest by men hoping to build a reputation for bravery.

Her presence had been put to use by several who'd seized the opportunity to escape blame for deeds they might otherwise not have dared commit. Rivals in business...and in love...disappeared. Their bodies were discovered in the marshes and the "Ogress" assumed a more deadly reputation. Thefts of sheep, goats, and cattle were attributed to her, and more than one impatient heir came to his inheritance sooner than he ought to have when wealthy fathers or uncles reportedly fell prey to the monster of the fen.

The brave knight who'd slain her did so by having an entire troop of armed lackeys surround and distract her so he could creep through the undergrowth and use an axe on the back of her ankle. With the tendon cut, she'd fallen, and his lance was waiting for her throat.

No one had ever bothered to see the quiet beauty beneath the simple disguise.

Amberly wept at the tale.

Many times Brontharn would take the princess out through a huge exit from the cavern, about which she had not known. The sprawling maze of caves had many chambers and corridors that had very probably never been explored by man...almost certainly so, or some provision would have been made to defend the castle against attack from below.

The giant's own portal was a high, narrow cleft behind a stand of ancient pines.

It looked like the trees, which were probably over a century old, had been planted deliberately to conceal what must once have been the door to the caverns of Carrowyn. Brontharn wondered if his own father might have set them there. Gutwort, who could only have heard of it from the giant's parents, had described to him in detail the location of the cleft and the trees that concealed it.

Amberly and Brontharn, with Galbor the wolf, would sit together in the forest, basking in the sun, exchanging accounts of their lives. Often she'd wear her loveliest gowns, her jewels and tiaras, because he had a great delight in beautiful things.

Through the trees they could see the castle atop the mountain, and it seemed a distant, foreign place to her. In all of that great fortress, she had not one true friend, and—save for her father—no one she truly loved.

I love you, Amberly," Brontharn said one afternoon.

He needn't have said it; she'd known it for months. But hearing it was pleasant, and it allowed her to speak her own love in return.

"Destiny has played a cruel joke on us," she said. "All we can ever be is friends, and even that is doomed. You cannot stay here much longer, for the herdsmen are complaining at the loss of their sheep and cattle. They suspect each other right now, but how long can it be before you are discovered? I don't want you to meet your mother's fate."

"I know," he nodded. "It was a vain pilgrimage on which I came. I wanted just to *see* the caverns of Carrowyn . . . to know that Gutwort's tales were true. I had no expectation of meeting anyone at all . . . least of all someone like you."

He reached one huge hand toward her and Amberly nestled into his palm. His skin was like soft leather, but warm and alive. She rested her arm upon his thumb as though it were the arm of a couch, and stroked the broad nail with her fingertips. It was agony to be limited to such an ineffectual touch when everything in her ached to embrace.

Her pain was echoed in his boyish face.

Though he'd lived a hundred years... longer than any man she'd ever known... her heart accepted the evidence she could see, and to her he was but a youth. The tears forming in his eyes were a young man's tears.

"What will you do?" she asked. "Where will you go?"

"Back to the forest, I suppose,"

Brontharn replied after a long moment. "Old Gutwort is long dead, of course. But there are few humans in the deep woods. I should not be bothered by brave knights. There is a mountain upon which I may build myself a castle. It will take many years... but I will *have* many years, and little else to occupy my time.

"I think I may throw a scare into a few villages on my way home. If rumor spreads that there is a giant in the land, perhaps some other of my people may hear of it and come seeking me." He sighed, his eyes showing little hope. "But in all the years I lived there with Gutwort, none of the gnomes, fairies, or elves we encountered had heard of another giant since the death of my mother."

Amberly could not control her tears. "I cannot bear to think of you so alone. Could I not come with you? Would it not be better to have a *friend*, even if that's all I can ever be?"

The sweet face of the huge creature smiled gently. "No," he said sadly. "You would grow old and die long before my house was completed. You would live your life in a forest grotto, without family, friends or companions. *I* would have the joy of your company, but not at the cost of your life and fulfillment.

"Here... in a while... you'll find someone of your own kind you can love. With him you will have children... a family ... and know that your life has had some meaning. I cannot take you from what fate surely meant for you to have."

They said sad goodbyes one early morning when the cavern was most beautiful. Amberly doubted she would ever go there again. It had stopped being simply a means of exit from the castle. It was a magical world called Carrowyn... a name that no one else would ever know.

Amberly went on with the business of being a princess. Her duty was to marry well, to benefit the kingdom, and bring honor to her family name ...then to raise strong sons for her *husband's* kingdom.

But the arrangements she herself had made specified that she would marry for *love*... a man of her own choosing. A man she agreed to marry would have every right and reason to believe he'd found favor in her eyes. And she didn't know if any man ever could.

Torn between a genuine sense of who and what she was, and her responsibilities to that position... and the love which would forever lie between her and whatever man she accepted in marriage... Amberly tried desperately to think of a way she could give back to her father the authority to make the choice for her.

It would have been easy except for her pride, which would not allow her to appear to have been unable—because of being a female—to accept the responsibility she'd demanded.

She watched Prince Derro Silverlance of the Kingdom of Fairland approach the throne. *Shall it be he?* she thought. *He's handsome enough. And it would be a good alliance.*

"My lady," he said... loud enough to be heard, but not so loud as to give the impression that he was performing for the benefit of the court. He bowed low ... gracefully, but not delicately. He was a man familiar with the courtly graces, but he was a man.

"Prince Derro," she responded, extending her hand for his kiss. "We are honored at your presence."

"Oh no, My Lady," he said politely, "the honor is entirely mine. We in Fairland had heard rumor of your beauty, but I'd not expected a goddess out of legend."

It was a pretty speech, but others before him had used it ... or variations of it. Amberly was aware of the fact that she wasn't *ugly*, but she hardly considered herself in the *goddess* category. She smiled the expected smile and bowed her head demurely. It wasn't proper, even for a princess, to accept such praise as though it were expected.

"After all the knights and heroes who have presented themselves to you," Prince Derro continued, "and not stirred your heart, it is bold and presumptuous of me to consider that *I* might be the one to win your favor. But I'd not be worthy of my title if I did not make the attempt."

"Am I a *prize*, then, to be sought as proof of knightly valor?" she asked, not totally in jest.

"A prize, yes," he responded, his eyes sincere. "Worthy of the greatest deeds. I come because I do not wish to spend the rest of my life wondering if you might have been mine if only I'd had the courage to try."

"And what brave deeds have you performed?" she asked, "... other than risking my refusal?"

The prince smiled acknowledgement of her barb, seemingly pleased that she was not so gullible as to be won by flowery declarations.

"It is customary to bring an offering," he replied. "But I would beggar the Kingdom of Fairland and not be able to tempt you with treasures more than have already been offered by the brave men before me.

"You've not been swayed by silks from the East, the ivory tusks of elephants, nor even—it has been said—by jewels stolen from a dragon's hoard. A throne carved of a single block of jasper has been offered to you, as well as a cloak of golden gryphon feathers. I have no such treasures. And it would hardly be complimentary of me to assume that, if you did not love me, you could be *purchased* with a gift of sufficient value."

Behind him, four lackeys eased down the stairway what appeared to be a carriage swathed in velvet. No one had yet offered a royal coach... but he had just finished saying he wasn't intending to try buying her favor.

As they drew it forward over the slate paving of the great hall, Amberly could see that the wheels were ordinary in appearance, neither carved nor gilded. She awaited his explanation.

"I will someday be king of Fairland," Prince Derro said. "But until then I cannot offer you its wealth. What I offer is myself, my love, my devotion, and proof that I would brave *anything* in your service and defense.

"I found no dragon, no gryphon to conquer in your name. But I bring you evidence of my valor."

The velvet draperies were whipped from off the cart, and Amberly stared into the glazed eyes of Brontharn of Carrowyn.

He could not see her. His head, alone, was all the cart contained. Brontharn would build no castle... nor would he live out his long life in loneliness. If he were in truth the last of his kind, then giants walked the earth no more.

"Father?" the princess said, her voice barely a whisper.

"Yes, my dear?" the king replied from his throne beside her. He clasped her outstretched hand, marveling at how cold her fingers were.

"I will wed," Amberly said to him and to the hushed assembly. "Anyone. Anyone you choose." She looked into Prince Derro's uncomprehending eyes. "Anyone at all... but *him*."

No one in the kingdom ever guessed the reason for her tears. ❧

The Swans Are Mute

by Micole Sudberg

Seven swans, pale and graceful, their wings marked, here and there, with feathers of gold; he saw them in his mind's eye, motionless on the glass-black lake, beneath a sky orange and gold with dawn, the humid air fresh with the scent of grass and leaf in their nostrils —

Dreams wracked him, fever-haunted. He twisted on a dank stone floor that sent chills through his bones, his wrist trapped in an iron manacle, his wing beating against wet stone, its feathers fluttering wildly, pearl-white, shadowed gold. And he dreamed:

Taint of smoke in his throat, blood smeared on grey stone — his brothers in chains, their eyes dull with exhaustion and dread; his sister with a red-stained knife in one hand, terror in her golden eyes. A man stared at her, blood staining his fingers where he had a hand clapped to his shoulder, his eyes grey and betrayed; a white silk surcoat shimmered over his mail, embroidered with a red and gold dragon. He spoke bitterly. *My curse on thee, lady, and on thy brothers; doomed be they to wear the forms of swans until thou shouldst knit for them shirts of thorn and nettle, and dost thou speak one word ere finished by thy task, unfinished shall it forever be.*

And twisting of bone, tearing of muscle — feathers of snow and amber bursting from his skin and before his eyes; he screamed, agony spraying through flesh and blood, and his scream transmuted into the terrible shrieking of a swan, and, panting, he saw before him six white swans with amber-threaded wings, and a thin, dark-haired girl staring at them in horror; and in the round gold eyes that stared back at him was his own reflection imprinted on black pupils, all white and gold. A knife dropped from the girl's hand. Clattering, it left half-moons of the red-brown on cloudy grey stones.

They fled, the seven white swans, pale feathers tumultuous against the huge yellow moon, acid-gold eyes wild and enraged; windows' shattered glass sprinkled the ground below them. The sorcerer-lord locked their sister into a tall tower, the tower that had been their father's before Lord Ranulf killed him, and the sorcerer killed Ranulf, in the wars that sorcerers and wizards were prone to; and now a new lord had won the palace Lirien of the seven towers, one raised for each of the old lord's sons. On moonless evenings faithful servants smuggled baskets of thorn to the old lord's daughter, and on days hid them in wicker baskets full of cloth, or under napkins folded on the trays of her food.

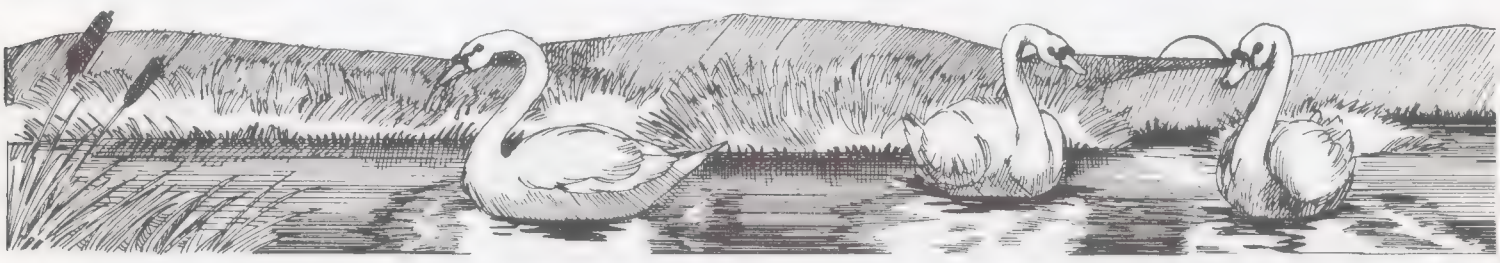
Each night she knit, her eyes red-rimmed and weary, her thin fingers pricked with thorns. The youngest brother, her twin, watched from her eyes, his own thoughts increasingly incoherent and swanlike, full of the shifts of wind and the ripples of water and the taste of insects. At day, she slept when she could. Often the sorcerer visited her, at first abrupt and cold, dirt marring one cheek, his hair dull with sweat and soil, dressed always in armor. *Ranulf's kin have attacked,* he said with chill courtesy. *We are under siege.* And later: *We have defeated them.* He strode restlessly about her room and paused by her window. She could see, past his head, a stormy-dark sky, a glass-black lake with seven small, white shapes motionless upon it. He was very still, gazing down at it. His face, slowly, softened, and one corner of his mouth turned down, with unhappiness or regret. She stared at him with huge, frightened eyes.

After that, he came to her clean and well-dressed, and spoke quietly to her of the domain which had been her father's, and was now his. The servants whispered to her, when they dared speak, that he was a kind master, glancing hesitantly at her face; and she asked one, who had been her nurse when she was a child, by writing on the stones with a charred stick: *Is he kinder than my father?* And the nurse bent her head and would not answer, with compassion in her eyes; which was never enough.

The girl was quiet, and her brother could not hear much of her thoughts — a vague sense of guilt; their father's face, slack in death; her brothers shrieking as feathers burst from their skin. He ruffled his wings impatiently, sending ripples through the water, and splashed water at one of his brothers. The other, larger and stronger, hissed at him, rage flaring in bestial eyes; frightened, he swam away.

At first, the sorcerer never looked at her. He grew less uneasy with her presence, and the strain in his face that looked like guilt began to ease; and now and then he rested his eyes on her uncertainly. He soon watched her often, his words soft, sometimes of Lirien, but also of his boyhood and his apprenticeship to a great mage, and to his long quarrel with Lord Ranulf. She would sit at the window and look out, or practice needlework — she feared always he would ask why her hands were scratched, and wished for an excuse — or she would simply sit, head bowed, and listen to him. She did not realize when she began to look at him when he talked. Once, she smiled up at him freely, her great golden eyes alight; he went very somber and touched her cheek gently, and said her name, softly. She opened her mouth, and then remembered she must not speak —

She felt very cold and miserable. Her brother poked at the surface of the lake



with his beak, absorbed with swan-thoughts.

The tenderness faded from the sorcerer's face, and he took his hand away from her cheek. She felt colder still, and numb, and he turned from her and left the room; she heard the click of the lock behind him.

She stayed very still and small and alone in the middle of the room, her head bent. She remembered: the tall man in armor, his clear grey eyes arrested, halting suddenly as he saw her; his men filing in behind him, filling her father's hall. He strode forward, caught her arm, bent over her — in fear, she struck with the knife that came to her hand, that her father had insisted she carry — *There may be times you would rather not live through,* her father had said only, grim; and she had feared this was one of them.

Wrongly? she inquired silently of herself, of her brother. *But — perhaps I mistook his intentions.* She turned restlessly to the window. I am sorry, she said to his mind, troubled. *My mistake has done ill for you.*

He snapped at a jeweled insect. It flew shirring beyond his reach.

She whispered his name, afraid. He was busy with swan-impressions, the fading of the light to silvery gold along the horizon, the darkening of the sky to midnight blue. The air chilled, and his feathers ruffled in irritation. He was hungry, and he paddled at the water with black, webbed feet. She could find no human thoughts in him at all.

Time's rhythms spun like ribbons twisted round each other by the wind, humping and shuddering under him as he writhed, hot and pained, in the cell. A glimpse of memory: his sister gazed wistfully into a mirror, her fingers touching her cheek where the sorcerer's had, her golden eyes large in a thin, brown face; the sorcerer visited her once more, his eyes guarded, his touch as wistful and unsure as hers. He poured pale, star-shaped flowers into her hands, silently, as though they were his heart.

Clang of metal against stone. He woke, his heart starting against his chest in a hiccough of pain, from surprise. Light hurt his eyes, and he squinted. He trembled helplessly, and sweat wet his limbs; he tried to sit, to collect himself, but he could not prevent his body from its exhausted shaking. The wing trembled most visibly: the feathers rustled, and one snowy plume shook free, floating to the shadowed floor. Armored men entered the small cell. Wordless thoughts tumbled through his mind. Fear tensed his body and he thought confusedly of escape, of a slender body, pale gold-touched wings beating as powerfully as a heart against a blackening sky.

Unkind hands unchained him, hauled him up, forced him into the lit hallway. He winced at the light and the cold, shivering. A man muttered, "Moon-touched—" Work-roughened fingers made warding-signs. He looked up, hurt, and opened his mouth to reply. Only a broken caw came out, frightening him, and he could not remember how to form words, in mind or on tongue.

They took him to another room, where he was bathed and clad in silk. He recalled such things, dimly, and tried not to hinder the servants who did it, and assisted them when he remembered how. He stood, thin and brown, in white and amber silk and black boots, his black hair neatly trimmed. He held the swan's wing awkwardly against his chest, shamed by the scornful glances the servants granted it, and flushed red, lowering his eyes. None of them had been his father's men.

They led him into a great hall: he knew it, the rounded, grey stones of the floor; the pale walls in which moved patterns like the shadows of leaves, occasionally flickering with gold; the narrow arched windows newly laid with glass — he and his brothers had broken the old panes. He caressed one wall with his hand, smiling faintly.

A girl waited at one window, her head bent, her black braid twined with pale, gold-edged ribbons. His breath caught painfully somewhere near his heart. He might have made a sound, for she turned in surprise, but he could hear nothing over the thundering of blood in his ears.

She stared at him, so small and dark in a silken white gown, the brilliant sunlight glowing on her skin till it looked soft as a child's. A sound broke from her throat, and, startled, she put a hand to it, very brown against the white lace. Then she ran to him and he caught her, and swung her up against him, spinning. Her laughter made him smile delightedly; he wept for joy. Her arms hurt, clutching him around the ribs, and he could feel the constriction of her breath against his tight grip, yet could not, somehow, let go. He buried his face in her hair, smelling flowers.

Her grip loosened, and she wept against his shoulder. Silently, joyfully, he stroked her hair, his fingers catching on the ribbons. His wing curved around her, sheltering. Gently he freed her hair of the ribbons, untying them, dropping them to the floor, and uncombed the braids with stiffened fingers.

She raised her face. "Kithal,'" she said softly, with wonder. He felt her joy splash through him — for a year she had not dared speak, constrained by the curse's threat.

He made a questioning sound, deep in his throat.

"Kithal," she repeated. He only stared down at her, mute. His silence bled into the air, and she went very still in the pale, quiet sunlight, her eyes almost frightened.

"Kithal," she whispered, "I remember your name because you are my twin, but now I cannot remember how they went, the names of all our brothers." Her hands slid up his arms to his shoulders; she looked afraid, and confused. "I used to repeat your names over and over in my head," she said softly, her face distant and dreamy. "Aidan, Trevalyn, Atens –" She stumbled over the sound. "Atensas?" He only gazed at her, frowning slightly. Desperate, she cried out, "I am sorry! I have tried and tried, but I cannot

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remember any more than four names, and I cannot remember whose they were — I am sorry, Kithal, I am sorry!"

Softly, he made a reassuring sound.

Her hands stiffened. She searched his face uneasily and murmured, "Why do you not speak?"

He averted his eyes and stepped back, sorrowful and ashamed. He lifted the large, pearl-sheened wing at his right shoulder. Soft white feathers, delicately shaded golden ones, were luminous in the brilliant hall. Light glowed along the pale walls patterned with shifting leaves of shadow and gold and fire. Fire sparked in one suddenly, and he shied back, terrified. The fiery outline deepened to shadow. He trembled, still afraid. The feathers of his wing pressed tightly together, and its muscles shivered, drawing it closer to his body.

She noticed; she stepped close to him, somber, and gently touched his cheek. "At least," she said, half-sighing, "our brothers escaped, free and whole..."

She ran her fingers along the outer feathers of his wing, delicately. He contained his flinch of pain, knowing it would hurt her more. Her mouth crimped unhappily with guilt. He touched her cheek, meaning: *It is not your fault.*

He remembered the blurred welter of swan-thoughts, physical sensations strewn among brief, powerful emotions, pure and quick; but human memory, sharper, gave him a slowly revolving glimpse of a rain-soaked night, feathers dangerously cold and wet, and his brothers and he flying over a casement window, and shuffling uneasily on swan-feet in a small room, honking softly and disturbedly, and the smell of wet feathers. Torch-glitter; his sister shivering in a soaked nightgown, with a dark mass in her hands: a shirt of nettles. She slipped it over the bent white neck of one swan. His feathers shimmered; he twisted with an agonized cracking of bone and sinew, spasming muscle and distorted shape — The eldest brother slumped on cold stones, exhausted, confused, astonished. He touched his face and recoiled. *O God* — and the broken whisper startled him into silence again. He placed a hand on his throat, felt the neck and chin strain and move. Softly he repeated, *O God,* listening intently to it.

His sister was slipping the shirts over the other pale necks, silent and graceful as words carved in stone, which glimmered faintly in the dimly lit room. Their round eyes were quiet pools of gold.

The iron-bound door of stone burst open, iron locks unfastening themselves with a glitter about them. Men invaded the room, mailed, swords naked in their hands. The girl whirled, dismayed; swans screeched. Her human brothers started up, their eyes fierce and their brown skin shadowy in the flickering light: they were unarmed and wore only the shirts of nettle.

The sorcerer strode forward, halted; the girl stiffened with her hands tugging a nettle shirt down over the neck of one of the last two swans. She tore her hands free as he began to glow and change. Her breathing was loud, ragged; the sorcerer stared at her, his grey eyes astonished. She turned and ran, desperately, to the last brother. The six elders leapt forward, struggled with the armored men for swords. The thorns scratched her tightly-gripping hands, she pulled it hard, down over the up-thrust black beak, the pale neck — the sorcerer snatched at the shirt — it came down over the snow-white, elegantly shaped head, and the swan lowered it — the last of the shirt caught on the level beak —

With desperate strength the girl dragged the shirt down over the swan's neck, as a sleeve tore off in the sorcerer's hand.

Hoarse screams froze them all, even the armored men with their bloodied swords. A youth writhed on the floor, thrashing one white and gold wing against stone. They stared, united in horror.

Silence, as the screams died, except for his panting cries. Then, in the queer stillness, the sorcerer raised bitter grey eyes to the girl's face and said with soft anger, cradling his hand bloodied from the thorns in the untorn one, *Don't you realize that if you had asked me, I would have freed them for you?*

His wing muscles loosened. He looked up to the gentle light of the hall and his sister's face. Behind her the window was a blue slice of sky: he was dizzy with longing for it. The wing muscles tautened, rose — the wind softening feathers, sky to wing through —

His sister touched his face. His wing wrenched back, pain jerking his heart against his chest with a dull thud. Startled, light-headed, he lowered the snowy wing, looking down at her.

She whispered, afraid, "Are you still so much swan you wish to be all so?"

He could not speak, but he understood words. Swallowing, he nodded.

She sighed. And a voice said, behind him, cold and clear: "Do you want to be a man?"

He turned. The sorcerer's body was taut with some strong emotion, his grey eyes burning chill, like dry ice, in a strained face whose lips' tight set indicated exhaustion or pain. He held one hand stiffly: half-healed scratches glistened on it. He glanced at the girl's face, grey eyes arrested, then he flinched away.

Kithal pleaded wih the sorcerer, confusion in his eyes. The sorcerer, his face suddenly intent, leaned forward, attempting to understand his thoughts. Kithal lifted his right shoulder, the wing sweeping from it, in a helpless shrug: *I do not know...*

His sister stepped forward. Her loose hair drifted onto his left shoulder; she peered at the sorcerer as intently as he did, her face close to his. He had a sudden, dizzying vision of how they must

look, black hair melting into black hair, the brown faces with bones that spoke of kinship. She plucked absently at the white silk of his sleeve. His breathing was harsh; his throat hurt, and he blinked rapidly. He opened his mouth, and strained his throat and tongue: a broken, child-like squawk.

He flinched. His sister's fingers lightened on his arm. Sympathetic pain tightened the skin around the sorcerer's eyes.

"What are we to do?" the girl asked softly.

Startlement widened the grey eyes. The sorcerer had never heard her speak before. Light danced on his fair skin, between black lashes and in grey irises.

In swan memory, soft pale wings unfolded slowly, feathers unfurling with tantalizing leisureliness against a crisp blue sky. A crescent moon floated above, smudged with pale blue and grey shadows. *Come,* instinct keened, this way, this... The chill air tasted of fallen leaves, purple-red, bright orange, yellow. The grass beneath insensitive, webbed feet was withered and pale, and thin ice-films floated on the surface of the lake and the sight of the white palace with its seven towers and the eighth higher than the rest.

Now he could be free of all but instinct; the sorcerer could make him so...

He swayed toward the sorcerer, dizzy with desire and revulsion. Languid memory, faint and painful: his mother singing: *Hush, little baby, don't you weep...*

Strong hands caught him on upper arm and wing, battening it down; he found himself held, supported, staring into reassuring grey eyes. His sister hovered beyond, stricken, distant but painfully clear.

"First," the sorcerer said breathlessly, "we must find out what he wants..."

His wing jerked upwards, wrenching muscles in his shoulder and back, a pitiful, painful attempt at flight. His sister's hurt, rejected face jerked him down again, as harshly. He keened, high and shrill in his throat, half-blind.

Shapes of light and shadow leapt into the sunlight, startling him into crying out. The sorcerer turned, surprised — his arms were caught and held behind him; he was forced to his knees, though he struggled.

He stared at his brothers, astonished. He realized he had seen them creeping across the floor, their movements as measured and unobtrusive as shadows shifting with the sun, their faces and limbs as cleanly carved as statues', wreathed in white silk tunics and gold-broidered vests and long black cloaks, their black hair shadowy, their eyes keen. Twisted chains of iron round their necks held bloodied thorns and a single rowan leaf: he saw them taking the charms from a thin, still-faced witch with large black eyes, a pensioner who had lived on their father's charity; she whispered harshly, *Obscuration, protection,* naming the charms' properties. He saw them gathering discontented men, and readying for attack on the hall, the witch preparing a sleep-spell for the sorcerer's men; and while the sorcerer had been distracted, she had cast it, and they had crept to their father's armory and stolen swords and knives.

One of the brothers held a knife to the sorcerer's throat, slender brown fingers tight; the skin pulled taut over the pale ovals of knuckles, and a ruby on the hilt glittered through the brown fingers like blood. The youth's wrist was held at the delicate angle of a bird's tilted wing, straight and untrembling; he and his brothers knelt and stood around the sorcerer like a gathering of glittery-eyed crows. The sorcerer's head was thrown back, his teeth clenched, but his grey eyes were wary, not afraid. His glance flickered to the girl. She drew in a deep breath.

"Oh, please," she said faintly, high, "please let him go."

The eldest of the brothers looked at her. A net of silver chain linked rings on his fingers to his wrists: their father had worn it once, a sign of his sovereignty. "Sister," the eldest said gently, "think better on it. He has enspelled us, and jailed you, and cast our brother in his dungeons. Do you trust his words?"

She bit her lower lip, anxious and uncertain. The sorcerer gazed at her, guarded. Kithal felt dizzy, vulnerable. He drew his wing bent over his chest to hide himself beneath the stiff, pale feathers. He could sense the sorcerer's memories: the moment before the curse, hurt and bitterness — his aid rejected, the sorcerer was filled with unreasoning anger; and then, with the swans fled, and the girl staring at him in fear, he did not know what to do. His heart labored painfully, that she should be afraid of him; his pride was offended, that she had not known he meant her no harm. He had her locked away — and locked away again after she had broken the curse, his accursed temper...

The eldest of the brothers knelt and put a fine-boned brown hand on the pale cheek. He turned the proud face to look at him, above the edge of the knife; and he spoke, gentle in voice and face, except for his eyes.

"Sorcerer," he said, "remove your spell from our brother."

The sorcerer caught his breath: startlement, it seemed and offense. "Prince," he answered," I will not."

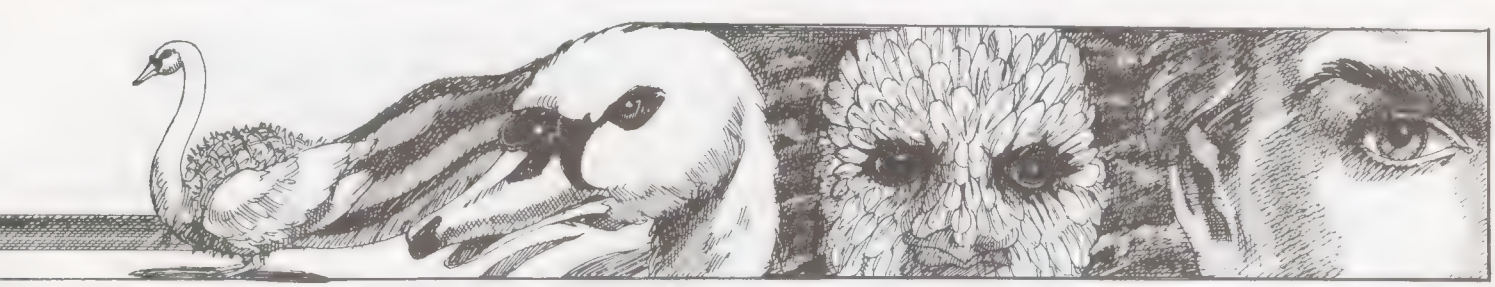
The slim brown hand tightened, drawing the sorcerer's head forward till the knife blade slid, imperceptibily, beneath skin, and the blood welled, impossibly vivid in that first moment, then spreading with a dulling oil-shimmer across the blade.

The eldest said inflexibly, "You must."

He was silent a moment; then, coldly: "I do not respond to threats."

Kithal swallowed. The girl's fingers knotted, twining round each other. She drew in a deep breath. "Kill him," suggested one of the brothers coldly, at Kithal's shoulder. His face was sullen; his eyes had a wolfish glitter. "The caster's death releases spells — "

"Threaten me if you wish, do as you wish —" The sorcerer was unafraid of the gold-burning eyes around him, the knife at his throat; wildness was in him,



Swans

temper and pride, and Kithal feared terribly that he would refuse to do now what he had offered freely before. "It was no spell I cast," the sorcerer said, with a grin like pain, "but a curse —"

Kithal remembered, light-headed: *My curse on thee, lady —*

"No measured work of magic, that, prepared in the fullness of time, fueled by skill and power, sustained by reason and control —"

— and on thy brothers —

"But a *curse*, once laid, removed only by the sayer's will, or its own fulfillment —"

The sorcerer's voice caught. Words spun in Kithal's head. *And on thy brothers brothers brothers*...He swayed. The world disappeared below him, green and brown and unimportantly small; the wind's cold rush softened the edges of his feathers. A girl in a high stone tower brooded by a window, looking down on a lake, fearing to trap her brothers forever in avian form, if she trusted where she ought not.

Sound died. Kithal took a deep breath, released it, his sense of time steadied, though he was still confused. He knew himself in the present again. The sorcerer's grey eyes were troubled, and looked directly into his.

"I am sorry," the sorcerer said to him. Regret changed the contours of his face; for a moment Kithal saw it as a man would, not a beast, the vision less distinct and laid over with complexities of thought and preconception and mingled emotions; then it disappeared into a simpler perception: light and shadow and the play of only the sorcerer's emotions, not his own.

Kithal could feel his sister's emotion in his body, almost confusing it with his own: Her fear gave way to pity; the tension in her face eased, and she put out a thin, small hand to the sorcerer, perhaps, or to the wrist of the brother who held the knife.

"If your life will avail us not, " said the sullen brother, grimly, "and your death will avail us not, at least your death will grant some pleasure —" His face was red and swollen with rage, and a knife flashed in his hand —

He drove it hilt-deep in the sorcerer's chest, and the bright blood spurted, staining the gold-worked hilt set with a ruby. Someone cried out. The sorcerer stumbled back, his weight bearing down the brothers who held his arms; he lay on the stones, blinking dazedly at the girl's face which hung above him, horrified. She caressed his cheek gently, her lips trembled, stunned and numb. He tried to speak; he coughed, and brilliant blood stained his lips. His voice was weak and raspy. He managed, somehow, to smile wistfully, rue twisting his mouth, though his grey eyes were dim with sorrow and pain.

"I am sorry," he said weakly, whispering, "I should have done this sooner...I wanted you to ask me. I wanted you to trust me enought to ask a favor of me...Oh, foolish, foolish..."

She slid to her knees, and rested his head on her lap, stroking his hair. She looked disbelieving still, dazed...She murmured blankly, "Hush, be quiet..."

Kithal's single hand ached with emptiness; he wished he could move, touch her, help —

The sorcerer squinted up at her, as if his sight were going; and he said wistfully, "My name is Athiyerrin. Do you think you might remember me?" And he coughed again, darker blood this time staining his lips, and his grey eyes went all misty and confused; and whispering, "Be thou free," he died.

She cried out in grief; but the cry melded with the shriek of the world, of bone tearing, flesh ripping — *Swan or man, which will you be?*

And he hung there for an eternal moment, a monstrosity of pearl-white feathers scattered with gold, and great golden eyes and light and wind —

Blue sky and the cold taste of freedom; water simultaneously chill and warm about webbed feet, and his pale reflection shimmering on black water, showing one shining gold eye. Honking filled his chest, expanding his wings, lifting him up, up —

A thin brown face, unlovely and stricken, luminous tears.

He shuddered, and the choice was made, and he dropped down to the stones bare and cold, his skin goose-pimpled over the smooth protuberances of his ribs, his hands splaying to take his weight and his knees smashing into stone: he could feel the impact create bruises, the pain sudden and hot. A cry burst from his lips, the sound stretching vocal cords and throat muscles painfully, his head flung back; his throat locked tight, tendon pulling against muscle under sleek brown skin. He saw himself in someone's mind, a brilliantly lit image in the pale hall: light glowing on brown skin and in blank, agonized golden eyes, shreds of silken clothes strewn about him on the floor. Then all his muscles convulsed, flinging him against the floor; stone bruised hands, cheek. His head rang, and he laid his bruised cheek on shadow cooled stone and let himself go limply still. His heart pounded, began to slow; he could taste blood on his tongue and feel the pulse in his wrists flutter against the stone. He closed his eyes, and released himself into the darkness.

Fear and excitement faded slowly. Peace came to him, gentling the heavy push of his heart against his ribs. His pulse assumed a steadier rhythm.

A soft warmth enfolded him. He opened his eyes. The eldest brother, kneeling, tucked his dark cloak around him, draping the soft black folds carefully around his shoulders as he sat up. Kithal clutched the edges together gratefully, as the eldest drew the cloak closed at the throat, piercing it with a brooch of knotted gold. Kithall stared at him.

He said, undertainly, "Aidan?"

His brother nodded, his thin, strong face grave. Brown fingers opened; his hands described Kithal's shoulders with one brief, eloquent getsture. "Look at you, little one," Aidan murmured. "You've grown in this past year."

Kithal whispered, "Was it only one year?"

Aidan nodded. Kithal swallowed, then steadied himself, accustoming himself to

the sense of time's passage, life's change. He tensed his body to get up. In the shift of muscles, a bit of whiteness fluttered from his newly human arm to the floor. He picked it up and examined it curiously. The snowy feather trembled between his thumb and fingers; a single strand of gold caught the light. He trembled — in fear? Relief? Sorrow? The emotion, unnameable, filled his throat, bringing tears to his eyes. When he looked in his brother's face, he saw his reflection imprinted on the glossy pupils: hair melting into darkness, large eyes transfigured with sorrow, the face vulnerable, uncertain.

He tried to speak, but could not. *For a year, I did not remember your name*....His throat rasped. "I — I —" A faint sound, expiring. He searched his brother's face with pleading eyes, afraid to touch him, his fingers still wound among the folds of the cloak, thin and brown against the thick-woven black cloth. *Please don't be angry with me. I forgot my own name too*...

Aiden touched his cheek gently. Kithal absorbed the sensation silently, then, with dawning pleasure, smiled.

Behind the eldest, a brother stepped out — Des'hirdan, who had always been gentle. He stretched out empty hands to someone beyond Kithal, his golden eyes distressed. Kithal stiffened, dread hollowing his chest and stomach. *But I must look, sometime, I must*... He turned.

His sister's head was bent, black hair hiding her and caressing the pale face of the sorcerer. *Athiyerrin*... His grey eyes were closed; vivid red stained his parted lips. The blood had stopped flowing, and had half-dried on the dagger and the white silk shirt. They were both terribly, frighteningly still, the girl and the sorcerer; her brown hands were tangled in his hair.

Kithal rose; stepped forward. He said softly, remembering her name, "Dominae."

She raised her face, frozen and inhuman among the black tangle of her hair. Then, frenziedly, she curled her fingers around the knife's hilt. The placement was awkward, all wrong, imbalanced; her fingers looked like broken twigs. With a terrible heave she tugged the knife out of the sorcerer's chest. Blood welled slowly. His face was peaceful.

She dropped the knife, gasping, jerking her hands away from it. Sticky smudges of drying blood striped her half-opened fingers. She looked up at Kithal, gulping air, mortal again, dazed.

"What am I to do now?" she said blankly. She held out her empty, bloodied hands to him. "Oh, what am I to do?"

Kithal's heart twisted. He knelt by her, looking down at the sorcerer's still form; he took her hands in his, not shying from the blood. "This is Aidan's, this palace," he said softly, "and—" He looked up; looked at the sullen one, Atensas. "And you will stay here, our brothers...But Mother left you her dowry land, 'Minae; we can go there, if you do not want to stay."

She nodded, and rested her head on his shoulder, then turned it fretfully, like a child, burying her face. Her shoulders shook with silent sobs. He stroked her hair, both his hands free now.

"Do you know why I chose to be a man?" he whispered.

She shook her head, not looking up, still weeping.

'"I realized I would miss you."

She was quiet a moment. She raised her face then, smiling through the tears; he could feel her as clearly as ever, grieved and happy both at once. She sniffed, and hiccoughed, and blushed.

"But," he added wistfully, "I wish I could still fly."

Dominae laughed at him, as he had hoped, the blush receding. Sniffing still, blinking rapidly, she straighened the collar of his cloak and drew the folds more closely together, to preserve his modesty, and her own.

"You are a fool," said one of their brothers, his voice very clear and very cold. Kithal's head jerked up. He stared at the brother held by two others, the sullen one, with blood flecking his bare arms and his white shirt. Dominae stiffened. Outrage curled through her, but she only fixed her eyes on Kithal's black cloak, on the brooch that fastened, a knot of gold that could be a dragon, a swan, a simple knot...

"Dominae," he said helplessly. *Should you not look up?*

She was silent a moment; then she did look up, and her mouth was a stiff line, her expression fierce. Sunlight pooled on the floor beside her, from one of the narrow, arched windows. "Atensas," she said bitterly. "I remember you. Is this how you repay me from freeing you of the spell?"

Atensas looked at her with pity. He was proud in his loose black trousers, his pale shirt, and his thorn charm, his gold eyes ablaze in his fine brown face, so like hers. Only — Kithal's fingers tightened on her arms; he pitied her thoughts, longing to refute them — what she had always known to be plain in a woman was handsome in a man — *but Athiyerrin thought me lovely...*

"Do you think," Atensas said ruthlessly, "that he meant what he said? Remember — remember who cursed us all to get in with..."

She took in a deep breath. "Go away," she said, almost angrily. "Oh, I wish I could hate you. Oh, go away!"

Silence. One of the brothers holding Atensas tugged at his arm, and began to lead him away. Atensas followed, unintimidated, confident enough not to send her a backward glance. Kithal, stricken, could feel his certainty that he had done right, his utter lack of regret. *God, O God, what have we become to kill so easily?*

"Come," Des'hirdan said, the gentle one, his voice quiet. He started forward. "Come, we will bury him."

Dominae held still a moment more, then turned. She bent over the sorcerer once more, trying to compose herself. She took in a ragged breath, and her shoulders shook. Kithal stood, and went to her; he placed his hands on her shoulders, and felt, despite his grief, a surge of joy — the sensation of hard shoulders beneath both his hands, two palms to feel flesh and warmth —

Kithal?" Dominae whispered. Incredulous — her voice was incredulous, and the sound arrested his thoughts. He peered over her head. "Kithal?"

The blood no longer welled. There seemed —

Dominae half fell forward, her hands scrambling among the rags of the sorcerer's shirt; she placed a palm over his heart, her eyes wide, her head cocked. She breathed, "His heart is beating — look, look, his chest is rising -"

Lithal, astonished, knelt, touched one shoulder. Magic pulsed through the still body, strong, strong — He whispered, "God in Heaven —"

Is this God's doing? Or the sorcerer's? How —?

Athiyerrin's mouth opened; his back arched. He drank in breath, gasping. Dominae laughed, looked up at Kithal, and he touched a pale cheek, dizzy with her joy. "Look," she cried, "look —"

Aidan and the others came closer, disbelieving; but it was Dominae who was bending over the sorcerer's face when the black lashes slowly parted, revealing luminous grey eyes, and in bemused wonder and dawning happiness he smiled. ❧

The Lady Greensleeves

by A. Orr

In early winter, Remy went hunting. He took his crossbow and skinning knife, a little food, and enough fur and leather to patch his boots should it be necessary. He wore his heaviest bearskin cloak with the deep hood, and hoped to find a deer quickly. Even a small deer would be enough to last the winter, if he was miserly with it and his other stores. By nature, he was a prudent young man and could have met this cold season with what he had provisioned during the summer and fall, but a series of deaths in the village had made it necessary for all to distribute food to the more helpless, and Remy had been overly generous to a widow who had helped him in the past.

He was a day, a night and another half day from the village before he found the first tracks. They came from a thicket and entered another and were fresh, but they led into the old forest where trees had never been cut and no one hunted. He hesitated, but the thought of hunger sent him forward.

Clumsy in his bear cloak, and though the snow was soft and only halfway to his knees, he knew he still made a great deal of noise. It was almost sure folly to hunt this way, but he was desperate. He would spend another night here, bowered by thick masses of cut fir branches beneath and above him, and start back for the village tomorrow — to borrow, to beg, to work in addition to his smithing to earn food, or to starve before the kindliness of spring.

The tracks were so fresh he thought The deer could not be too far ahead, so herisked the bleaching cold and removed his cloak, hanging it from the snapped branch of a near tree. He could move more freely thus unencumbered, but he would have to *keep* moving to stave off the freeze.

He eased around the far thicket, ignoring the soft crunch of his footsteps, and picked up the tracks on the other side. Only a few steps farther and the hoofprints became suddenly deeper, blurred, scattered: the deer had panicked from a standstill and fled. Remy cursed: it had heard him.

His eyes followed the traces of flight straight through the trees ahead, and just between two oaks Remy could barely see evidence of a greater commotion.

Curious, he crept to the oaks and the testimony of attack and struggle. The snow was flattened as with rolling bodies, and blood flecked the area, sometimes larges patches of it. He knelt and put the fingertips of a gloved hand to one of the splashes and then smelled it. Still fresh, still warm. He had missed the deer by a few moments. But he had heard nothing and there were no other tracks clear enough to enable him to know what had slain.

Whatever it was, though, it had dragged the deer to another place — the beaten, smeared snow trailed even farther into the old forest.

Remy followed with vague thoughts of slaying the slayer, probably a late bear.

The animal had managed to drag its burden up and across a deadfall which Remy also gingerly mounted, trying to keep his crossbow in a position where it would be quickly useable.

Near the top of the deadfall he peered over into a small clearing. It was a panther that had taken the deer, one of the rare black ones.

A branch broke beneath Remy's knee and the panther lifted its muzzle and looked directly at him — seemingly not startled, only inconvenienced. It must have heard his advance: perhaps it was too hungry to flee. He was close, and as he stared back, the cat's eyes seemed to fluctuate from green to golden to something in between.

Remy screamed at it, but the cat did not move. He found a loose branch and hurled it; the cat did not watch the wood's path through the air but moved its head a fraction to see where the limb landed, and then a fraction back to stare again.

The man wanted the deer. It could mean that he lived till summer's lushness. He found a footing, rose, and fitted a bolt to the crossbow. Still the panther did not move. Its calmness unnerved him and the shaft went wide; it struck the cat in the left hindquarters and went completely through the soft flesh there. The cat screamed, leapt and bit at its hip, whirled and lowered its head and essayed a few stalking steps toward Remy. Then it sat. It licked its hip once and turned upon Remy a gaze so calculating, so angered and curious at once, that he was stunned. It showed him its back and walked slowly away, limping.

Remy gutted, skinned and quartered

the deer quickly, shoving the warm meat into the bags he carried. These woods were too old, and there were too many tales about them and the creatures that lived within, and he was cold and hungry and scared.

When he had retraced his own footsteps to the tree where he had hung his cloak, the cloak was not there. Panther prints and some blood smears led to the tree from a different direction than did Remy's own steps, but none led away. The snow was pure. There were deep claw slashes in the bark.

Remy began toward his village, determined to move as quickly as possible and not to sleep.

In the height of summer, Remy went hunting. He took his light bow and skinning knife, some cheese and bread, and circled his neck with amulets to ward off evil. He went to the old forest.

The deer he had taken from the panther in winter had probably saved his life, though its taking had precipitated an illness of the chest that had nearly killed him. He had reached his village exhausted, sick and so cold he felt as if he might break. His hut was icy and he had barely the strength to light a fire, fry and eat some of the deer's liver before collapsing. Then came the fever, and with the fever came the dreams.

In the dreams he was always in the old forest, naked and weaponless. In his dreams it was always summer, hot and still and oppressive, and he was merely wandering, searching for something. He was not hurried, or afraid. He noted with a strange, detached fascination how peaceful was the forest, how replete with both animals and growth, and taking an odd pleasure in the way the light fell through the dense canopy or in how a mass of lovely, red and white fungus grew from the heaving roots of an ancient oak.

He would come upon the panther in a circular glade; the grass soft and cool and very green; diffused beams of gilt sunlight slanting through the overhanging and surrounding firs, light as rich and untouchable as that which streamed from the windows of the great lord's Keep; a breeze that caressed and freshened. Remy would sit crosslegged only a few steps from the panther.

The black cat was always reclining, resting. Sometimes she would wash her face like a house cat, sometimes lick her wounded hindquarters (the wound was ever fresh in Remy's dreams), sometimes only stare impassively at him with her changing eyes. For the panther *was* female, this Remy became aware of gradually by noticing a certain delicacy of movement, a certain refined quality of gesture, an indefinable femininity of facial and bone structure even in so large an animal.

Often Remy would wake from the dreams chilled and sweating; more often he felt renewed. While the winter was full deep and the snow drifted halfway to the rooftops, he spent his time recovering and wondering about the dreams. The same dream came so frequently that often when he woke he could swear he smelled a lingering odor of summer in the confines of his stale hut.

In the spring he smithed, laboriously at first, but he was young and his strength returned with activity. Early summer he alternated between smithing, stocking his larder with unperishables and repairing his hut against next winter.

Still he dreamt, and even with the illness long gone, the episodes retained the quality of fever dreams.

And so in high summer Remy hunted the panther, not to kill, but because he had become obsessed and must know what harm had been done by the wound he inflicted. The dreams had taken him, wrapped him in illogical feeling that no harm could come to him from the forest cat. The bow was defense against other possible dangers or perhaps a rabbit should he happen on one; the amulets against the elder woods and the things that lived in them.

In summer the walk was easy, and simple to find the beginning of the old forest not only because the trees suddenly became markedly more dense but because the human and animal trails veered away, tangling back into the more known and lesser storied slopes of the lower mountainsides.

So Remy entered, and the smell was different. Farther, and he found things from the dreams: here a large, low branch that doubled in upon itself in an impossible and unnatural, nearly perfect circle; a welling spring whose mossy margins were overwhelmed by countless bright salamanders; a flock of ravens in a disturbingly symmetrical pattern on the ground; there the assemblage of red and white fungus. A light breeze tickled his neck, played in the locks of his hair, seeming to follow at his back no matter which way he turned. Once a silent hawk glided from behind him, the wind of its passage lifting his hair, and continued down a perfect but anomalous tunnel of trees and their high, wedded greenery. Once, two miniscule hands parted a cluster of leaves and a tiny, perfect human face peered at him, only to immediately let the leaves snap together again.

Remy traversed the tunnel with the obscure but increasing conviction that this was yet another dream, that he had not shaken the illness and perhaps all the smithing of spring and early summer had only been other illusions. He knew with the surety of vision that at the end of the gallery of trees he would step into the panther's glade.

And he did, to the cool, very green grass and the suffused beams of sun, though a woman sat there with her back against a tree, twining mountain flowers into a wreath.

Remy was so startled that his knees weakened and he found himself sitting on the ground, crosslegged, his quiver and arrows upset.

She laughed gently, a low throaty laugh that stirred Remy's loins. She glanced at him from under hooded lids and said, "I have heard your passage for some time now, villager. How can you hunt so unquietly?"

Remy stared at her long fingers as she wove the flower stems, afraid to look elsewhere for more than a few seconds at a time: the wide face and slanting cheekbones; the extremity of the tilt of her eyes; the peculiarity of a nose that neither narrowed at the bridge nor flared at the tip; a mouth with only the barest hint of softer lips; a woman's body, but disquietingly muscular, breathtakingly molded within a long gown the exact shade of the summer leaves. She should have been a horror, her separate features came so close to deformity, but those same features fit together so naturally, so uncompromisingly, the destiny of their arrangement so obvious that Remy knew she was the most beautiful creature he could ever hope to see in his life. Her beauty was unconditional.

"I...I beg your pardon for interrupting you, my lady," Remy muttered, and began to get to his feet. Of course she was the daughter or wife of some great lord. No village woman was ever born with such natural grace or inherent refinement of movement. In her presence, Remy felt so rude and common that his entire body

Greensleeves

turned hot in embarrassment.

"Sit," she said.

Remy sat immediately. He knew he was going to take a long, desperate look at her face, but he began by looking at her bare, wide feet, the toes curled into the grass beneath the hem of her long dress, then lingered on the wing of midnight hair so long she had looped it under one arm and across her lap, and lingered again on her fingers. It took a moment for him to understand that the fingers were compellingly still now, crushing some of the flowers.

He raised his eyes to her face. She was staring at him, into him, and he watched her eyes changed from green to golden to something in between. The pupils were vertical.

Remy swallowed a scream that almost strangled him and scrambled to his feet. Of course, of course he should have known. There would be a scar on her left hip. "Who are you! *What* are you!"

She licked the back of her hand with a small, pink tongue and smeared the moisture languidly across the corner of her mouth and then her cheek — a candid, artless gesture.

"I am Amina, the Lady Greensleeves, the Lady of this forest. You know me."

Remy was literally struck senseless. At one blow, painlessly, he was rendered blind, deaf and dumb, could smell nothing, feel not even the light weight of the clothes upon his body.

He was very young and lost. He knew his parents were looking for him and was afraid because he knew they would be afraid for him. He was not afraid of the forest in which he wandered, the forest he had been told never to enter. He thought it was pretty, and he liked the way the rabbits and squirrels let him approach and rub the spaces between their ears. He had pulled a handful of flowers to give his mother when he saw her, so she would not be angry at him.

He pulled more flowers and then there was a lady there, and she gave him some daisies to add to his. She was so beautiful that Remy was at first intimidated, but she got down on her knees, to his own level, and showed his baby hands how to twine and not break the stems of the flowers so that he could make a chain of them. She spoke softly to him and sometimes the words ran together and did not make any sense, and her voice became the same gentle purr as his mother cat's when she nursed her kittens.

He was amazed by the texture and moss color of her dress, a shade for which no one in his village had the dye and therefore must be the luxury and province of a queen, and he loved her hair, unlike any woman's he had ever seen; so obstinately black and straight, nearly the same length as her gown, and oily with the healthiness of a young, well-fed animal.

She lifted him into her arms and cuddled him to her breast and he snuggled there still clutching his flowers. Her chest was broad and deep, and he guiltily compared it to his mother's, which was narrow and bony. He could feel the soft slide and play of her powerful muscle as she walked with him, and he had never felt so safe and protected.

He fell asleep in her arms, to her blurring murmurs and the comfort of her gliding steps, and did not wake until she lowered him to the ground.

He was at the edge of the old forest. In the far distance, he could hear people shouting his name.

The lady pointed along a path and gave him a small push in that direction. He turned to look at her again, but could find nothing to say. He went toward the voices. The flowers that he clutched were wilted, and he wept.

When Remy regained all his senses, with a rush, it was to find that he was weeping as helplessly as a child. He had never told anyone about the encounter with the lady, not because he feared their laughter but because he thought it had been a dream, and it was a special dream and not to be shared. As he grew older the memory of the forest woman became sentimental and slightly embarrassing, and with time and adult responsibility he had forgotten the dream or incident entirely. Until now. But it had always lain as a seed in his heart, far more profound than the vagaries of either fantasy or memory. He had loved her for a very long time.

She was gone from the glade. She had left the wreath of flowers on the ground in front of him, and large paw prints still bowed the damp grass.

As Remy reached the edge of the old forest, the flowers wilted in his hand.

When next he went to the forest, he went as a lover. He took with him a flask of hard-bought wine, bread and cheese of his own labour, eggs, summer apples, fried ham, a long, red ribbon.

He walked almost unconsciously, knowing without acknowledging that both his thoughts and actions were not only unnatural but foolish, as well. He had no reason to trust her, despite her harbor when he was a child. He had unknowingly wounded her and she might not be so forgiving of that. He was presumptuous; she was, after all, a queen and he a poor smith. He almost turned back, suddenly lacking the courage to face her, and found just as suddenly that he lacked the courage not to.

As he had known and been afraid of, she waited on him in the glade, and he not even really aware of how he got there.

She lay upon his bearskin cloak in a patch of sun, her knees curled, torso twisted so that she could rest both forearms flat upon the ground and her cheek upon her forearms. She lifted her head and opened her changing eyes as he entered the glade.

"You go unquietly, villager, for a hunter."

"I hunt only love, my lady."

He crossed to her and she received him.

He lay with his head upon the strength of her broad chest and traced the path of her unformed nose with a finger. "Come live with me." He was still stunned by the alternate bouts of ferocity and tenderness.

She turned her head from him and said, "I cannot."

"Why?" His finger moved from her nose to the puckered scar on her hip.

"You know why. We are not the same kind, you and I. I belong to the forest."

"Then I will stay with you."

She growled, a sound so immediately different from the past few hours' purrs and whispers that Remy quickly drew away.

She faced him furiously. "Fool! Would you have me be this way all the time? I *cannot* be! What would you love were I not in this form? Would you kiss my bloody lips after a kill? Kiss it from my whiskers? Would you den with me among the rocks?"

"Yes!"

"Then twice a fool! Remember your childhood, Remy. Am I older now? Less strong?"

Remy shook his head in confusion.

"And I will never be. My race lives long and long and long. We do not age, we do not die except by accident or slaughter. I am both cat and woman; you are only man." She had become sad and distant. It was only the truth, but Remy felt she regretted the truth as much as he.

"Your race?" He found he was crying soundlessly. "Are there others then?"

"Not here. Not in this forest. There are others far away to the east."

Remy touched his fingertips to his eyes. Denial rushed upon him as swift, hot, and hurtful as the tears.

"I *must* stay here! I will hunt with you! Den with you! I do not care what you are when you are not a woman...it makes no difference! OR...what must I do? Make sacrifice to the dark gods? Find a witch to curse me? A charm or potion? Tell me...there must be a way I can be made to be like you...you are all my *life*!"

"We make each other, Remy, my heart. We make each other in pain and blood, teeth and claws, we make each other in the near-slaying. But we never make each other from those we love."

Remy stood, shaking. "I will suffer anything! Take my heart between your teeth if that will do it...crush me between your paws. I will submit to anything, everything, to be with you. I will not live without you!"

Amina rose. There were tears on her cheeks and she loosened the red ribbon from her hair and dropped it to the grass. "You leave me no choice."

With both hands, she swept her hair around to cover her nakedness. In a graceful continuation of the movement she both lowered her arms and crouched as if to sit, but everything softened in that movement and when her hands touched the ground they were paws, and the black hair that had been loose was molded to her limbs. And the change was so swift and lovely and *correct* that for a moment Remy forgot to brace himself for the coming pain and horror.

He watched her eyes change colors and fresh tears slide into the soft fur. He had not known cats could cry.

Slowly, from a sitting position, she lifted a paw toward him — as uncertainly as a kitten might reach out to touch something new in its world — and Remy was sure that paw could smash his skull with one gentle blow.

In an astounding feline acrobatic the panther bunched her muscles, twirled upon herself, and leapt from the glade. Remy was not certain whether or not her paws had touched the earth after her initial bound.

He caught up the red ribbon from where it lay and first twined it around his fingers, then tied it round his wrist. Soon he was walking briskly, the playful breeze laughing at his nakedness and urging him on. She had run eastward. He need only follow.❦

ANNOUNCEMENT: Off With the Old and On With the New...

Dear Readers,

I hope you are enjoying this issue. I love this fabulous cover by George Barr - it reminds me of the "Skycastle" cover for the very first issue of this magazine. I remember carrying the color proof of that picture with me everywhere when I assumed responsibility for getting the Premier Issue to press. Stepping from my role as Marion's CPA and Financial Advisor, I thought to myself -- oh dear, having to put a magazine together to do this cover justice is going to be a little tricky! And here we are at Issue #11, and on to the next step.

The magazine is now a vibrant vehicle within itself and it's ready to take off. Marion and I would like you to welcome the new managing editor, Rachel Holmen. Rachel, as you may know, was the managing editor of LOCUS magazine for five years, and she is now taking my place.

There are so many people I want to thank for the enormous help they have been in pulling this project together. Authors, Artists, Readers, Booksellers, friends, colleagues, etc. who donated some of them incredible time, energy and so much of themselves pointing me in the right direction, endlessly trying to explain Fantasy/Science Fiction to me, offering encouragement, etc... In this case I can say that I literally could not have accomplished anything without them. The first and foremost person is Curtis Stoddard, a key employee of a client I had in Santa Rosa. Curtis, on a moment's notice, worked tirelessly and brilliantly to help bring the first issue from a fantasy to reality. I would also like to thank the trio George Scithers, Darrell Schweitzer and John Betancourt who for the past almost three years now, have been there for me every step of the way, as has George Barr, David Bradley, Amelia Petrovich, and of course Bobbe Lee. So many others, Jim Balkovek, Mary Stanleigh, Robin Stilwell, Silas Andrews. Laura and Kelly Freas, Alicia Austin and Jinx Beers, Dick Lupoff, Janet Fox, David Cherry, the folks at Spilman Printing, and Joe Morocco of Color Media, Alec Sherman, Deborah Wheeler, Lynne Armstrong-Jones, Bob Liddil, Deborah Milletello, Selina Rosen, John Mannor, chuq von Rospatch, not to mention my family, who sacrificed so many things to allow me to work on this project, and believed in me. And my friends who supported me. I have found one thing in life, to follow what you truly believe in, and give it all that you've got. It may not always turn out exactly the way you'd like, but you've done your best. And for those of you not listed here, please know that you are in my thoughts and that I truly thank you for your help in making all of this possible. I will miss you. **–jlb**

It is only fair to say that Jan has set a new standard for editorial competence and will be greatly missed. It's all the more astonishing that she did this without really knowing anything about our little fannish community and never having, really, read any science fiction or fantasy. I had to explain the first thing to her about it; and whether she understood it or not, she certainly did a wonderful job with it. She brought us out of nowhere to a functioning entity, with a Nebula nomination and a Chesley art award winner. We are looking forward to a new magazine – with all the writers of the old and hopefully some new ones. We don't know quite where we're going – but it'll be interesting to find out. Stay with us. **–MZB**

BALKOVEK 90

Be It Ever So Humble

by Tanya Huff

"So, got any dirt on this place?" Magdelene asked the gold and black lizard who was sunning itself on a nearby rock.

The lizard, looking more like a beautifully crafted piece of jewelry than a living creature, merely flicked its inner eyelid closed and pretended to be asleep. Children with rocks or nets it had to do something about. Young women in donkey carts who asked stupid questions could safely be ignored.

Magdelene studied the little village nestled along the curve of its natural harbor and chewed reflectively on a strand of chestnut hair. It looked like a nice place but, as much as she wanted to settle down, as tired as she was of constantly packing up and moving on, she knew better than to get her hopes up.

In a dozen years of travelling, she'd learned that the most jewel-like villages, in the most bucolic settings, often had the quaintest customs. Customs like welcoming wandering wizards with an axe, or attempting to convince wandering wizards to stay by outfitting them with manacles and chains, or by suggesting the tarring and feathering of wandering wizards with no better reason than the small matter of a straying husband or two. For the most part, Magdelene had found these customs no more than a minor inconvenience although, had she known the man was married, she would never have suggested they...

She grinned at the memory. He'd proven a lot more flexible than she'd anticipated.

"Well, H'sak?" She spit out the hair and glanced back at the large mirror propped up behind the seat of the cart. "Shall we check it out?"

H'sak, trapped in the mirror, made no answer. Magdelene wasn't entirely certain the demon was aware of what went on outside his prison but, travelling alone, she'd fallen into the habit of talking to him and figured, just in case he ever got out, it couldn't hurt if he had memories of pleasant, albeit one-sided, conversations. Not, she supposed, that a bit of chat would make up for her trapping him in the mirror in the first place. Stretching back, she pulled an old cloak down over the glass — no point in upsetting potential neighbors right off — then gathered up the reins and slapped them lightly on the donkey's rump. The donkey, who had worked out an understanding with the wizard early on, took another few mouthfuls of the coarse grass lining the track and slowly started down the hill to the village.

At the first house, Magdelene stopped the cart and sat quietly studying the scene. A few chickens scratched in the sandy dirt that served the village as a main street, and a black sow sprawled in the only visible bit of shade, her litter suckling noisily. A lullaby, softly sung, drifted through one of the open windows and from the beach came the screams and laughter of children at play. Just the sort of lazy ambience she appreciated.

"Who are you?"

Languidly, for it was far too hot to be startled, Magdelene turned. A boy, nine or ten years old, naked except for a shell threaded on a frayed piece of gut, peered up at her from under a heavy shock of dusty black hair. Although he showed no signs of malnutrition or neglect, his left arm hung withered and useless by his side.

"My name is Magdelene." She pushed her hair back off her face. "Who are you?"

"Juan." He edged a little closer. "You a trader?"

"No. I'm a wizard." Over the years, she'd discovered life worked out better if she didn't try to hide that. It made explanations so much easier when things started happening. And things always did.

The boy looked her up and down and tossed his head. "Ha!" he scoffed. "Tell us another one. Wizards got grey hair and warts. You're not old enough to be a wizard."

"I'm twenty-seven," she told him a little indignantly. He was a fine one to talk about not old enough...

"Oh." Juan considered it and apparently decided twenty-seven was sufficiently ancient even without the grey hair and warts. "What about your clothes then? Wizards wear robes and stuff. Everyone knows that."

He had a point. Wizards did wear robes and stuff; usually of a dark, heavy, and imposing fabric; always hot, scratchy, and uncomfortable. Magdelene, who preferred to be comfortable, never bothered.

"I'm the most powerful wizard in the world," she explained as a rivulet of sweat ran under her bright blue breastband, "so I wear what I want."

"Yeah, sure," he snorted. "Prove it."

"All right." She gathered up the multicolored folds of her skirt, jumped down off the cart, and held out her hand. "Give me your arm and I'll fix it."

"Oh no." He backed up a pace and turned, protecting the withered arm behind the rest of his body. "You ain't proving it on me. Find something else."

"Like what?"

Juan thought about it a moment. "Could you send my sister some place far away?" he asked hopefully.

Magdelene thought about that in turn. It didn't seem worth antagonizing the village just to prove a point to one grubby child. "I could, but I don't think I should."

The boy sighed. The kind of sigh that said he knew what the answer would be but thought there could be no harm in asking.

They stood together in silence for a moment, Magdelene leaning against the back of her cart — perfectly content to do nothing — and Juan digging his toe into the sand. The donkey, who could smell water, decided enough was enough and started towards the center of the village. He was hot, he was thirsty, and he was going to do something about it.

As the cart jerked forward, Magdelene hit the ground with an unwizardlike thud. Closer proximity proved the sand was not as soft as it looked. "Lizard piss," she muttered a curse, rubbing at a stone-bruise. When she looked up, Juan had disappeared.

She shrugged philosphically and, following along behind the donkey, amused herself by pulling back an image of Juan as an adult. Long and lean and sleekly muscled, it was a future worth sticking around for. At some point between now and then, she appeared to have convinced him to let her fix his arm. It looked like she'd be staying, at least for a while.

An impatient bray demanded her attention and she allowed the image to slip back to its own time; they'd arrived at the well.

When the trough was full, and the donkey had bent his head to drink, Magdelene, pulled by the realization she was no longer alone, slowly turned. All around the edges of the square stood the children of the village, staring at her with wide dark eyes.

"Yes?" she asked.

The children merely continued to stare.

Demons, she decided, *were easier to deal with. At least you always knew what demons wanted.*

"Magdelene-lady!"

The children stared on as Magdelene gratefully noted Juan approaching with an adult in tow. The old man had been bent and twisted by the weight of his years, his fingers warped into shapes more like driftwood than flesh. His skin had been tanned by sun and wind and salt into creased leather, and any hair he'd had was long gone. He followed Juan with the rolling gait of a life spent at sea, and his jaws worked to the rhythm of his walking.

"Whatcha doing sitting around like a pile of fish guts?" he growled at the children as he stopped an arm's length from Magdelene and glared about. "Untie her beast, put him to pasture, and get that wagon in the shade."

The children hesitated.

"You are staying a bit?" he asked, his growl softening, his dark eyes meeting hers.

Magdelene smiled her second best smile — she couldn't be certain his heart would be up to her best — and said, "Yes." She wanted very much to stay for a bit. Maybe this time things would work out.

The old man nodded and waved both twisted hands. "You heard her. Get!"

They got, Juan with the rest, and Magdelene watched bemused as her donkey was led away and her cart was pulled carefully to rest under a stand of palms.

"Boy says you told him you're a wizard."

"That's right."

"Don't have much need for a wizard here. Wizards make you soft and then the sea takes you. We prefer to do things for ourselves."

"So do I," Magdelene told him, leaning back against the damp stones. "Prefer to have people do things for themselves, that is." She grinned. She liked this old man and sensed in him a kindred spirit. "To be honest, I like people to do things for me as well."

He returned the grin and his eyes twinkled as he looked her up and down. "Ah, child," he cackled, "what I could do for you if I were only fifty years younger."

"Would you like to be?" she asked, rather hoping he would.

He laughed, then he realized she was serious. "You could do that?"

"Yes."

His gaze turned inward and Magdelene could feel the strength of the memories he sifted. After a moment, he sighed and shook his head. "Foolish wishes, child. I've earned my age and I'll wear it with honor."

Magdelene hid her disappointment. Personally, she couldn't see the honor in blurred eyesight, aching bones, and swollen, painful joints but if that was his choice....

There were sixteen buildings in the village, eight goats, eleven pigs, twenty-one chickens, and fourteen boats. No one had ever managed an accurate count of the cats.

"Six families came here three generations ago," Carlos, the old man, explained as they stood on the beach watching boats made tiny by distance slide up and down the rolling waves. Through his eyes, Magdelene saw the harbor as it had been, sparkling untouched in the sun, never sailed, never fished, theirs. "I'm the last of the first. I've outlived two wives and most of my children as well."

"Do you mind?" Magdelene asked, knowing she was likely to see entire civilizations rise and fall in her lifetime and not entirely certain how she felt about it.

"Well..." He considered the question for a moment. "I'll live 'til I die. Nothing else I can do."

"You didn't answer my question."

He patted her cheek. "I know."

That night, in the crowded main room of the headman's house, Carlos presented Magdelene to the adults of the village. "...and she'd like to stay on a bit."

"A wizard," the headman ruminated. "That's something we don't see every day."

Magdelene missed much of the discussion that followed as she was busy trying to make eye contact with a very attractive young man standing by one of the deep windows. She gave up when she realized that *he* was trying to make eye contact with a very attractive young man standing by the door.

"...although frankly, we'd rather you were a trader."

"The traders are late this year?" Magdelene guessed, hoping she hadn't missed anything important.

"Aye. They've always come with the kayle."

Just in time, she remembered that kayle were fish.

"Surely you saw them on the road?" a young woman asked hopefully.

"No." Magdelene frowned as she thought back over the last few weeks of travel. "I didn't." The emptiness of the trail hadn't seemed strange to her at the time. It did now.

"I don't suppose you can conjure one?" asked a middle-aged woman dryly, tamping down her pipe.

The room rippled with laughter.

"I could," Magdelene admitted.

The room fell silent.

Magdelene cleared her throat. She might as well get it over with. "I'm the most powerful wizard in the world," she began.

The middle-aged woman snorted. "Says who?"

"Well, uh..."

"Doesn't matter. Would this conjured trader do us any good?"

"Probably not." A trader conjured

suddenly into the village would be more likely to trade in strong hysterics than anything useful.

"I thought as much." The woman expertly lit her pipe with a spill from the lamp. "What in Neto's breath are we wasting our time here for, that's what I want to know?"

"I thought you might like to know that a stranger, a wizard, has come to the village," Carlos told her tartly.

She snorted again. "All right. Now we know." She pointed the stem of her pipe at Magdelene and demanded, "You planning on causing any trouble?"

"Of course not," Magdelene declared emphatically. She never *planned* on causing any trouble.

"Will you keep your nose out of what doesn't concern you?"

She had to think about that for a moment, wondering how broad a definition could be put on what didn't concern her. "I'll try."

"See that you do."

"So I can stay for a while?"

"For a while." Her head wreathed in smoke, the woman rose. "That's that, then," she said shortly, and left.

The headman sighed and raised both hands in a gesture of defeat. "You heard her. You can go."

As people began to leave, Magdelene leaned over and whispered to Carlos, "Why does he let her get away with that?"

Carlos snickered, his palm lying warm and dry on Magdelene's arm. "Force of habit," he said in his normal speaking voice. "She's his older sister, raised him after their mother drowned. Refused to be headwoman, said she didn't have the time, but she runs every meeting he calls."

The headman smiled, for Carlos' speech had risen clearly over the noise of the departing villagers. "Look at it this way, grandfather, the village gets two fish on one piece of bait. I do all the work and Yolanda does all the talking." He stood, stretched, and turned to Magdelene. "Have you got a bed, Wizard?"

Studying the muscles of his torso, still corded and firm for all his forty odd years, Magdelene considered several replies. All of which she discarded after catching a speaking glance from the headman's wife.

"While the weather holds," she sighed, "I'm perfectly comfortable under my cart."

"And I *am* perfectly comfortable," she sighed again a half hour later, plumping up the pillows on her huge feather bed, "but I wouldn't mind some company." As if in answer to her request, the canvas flaps hanging from the sides of the cart parted and Juan poked in his head. "I was thinking," she muttered to whatever gods were listening, "of company a little older."

Juan blinked, shook his head, and gazed around curiously. "How'd you get all this stuff under here?" he demanded.

"I told you," Magdelene poured herself a glass of chilled grape juice, "I'm the most powerful wizard in the world." She dabbed at the spreading purple stain on the front of her tunic. "Can I fix your arm now?"

He'd didn't answer, just crawled forward and found himself in a large room that held — besides the bed — a wardrobe, an overstuffed armchair, and a huge book bound in red leather lying closed on a wooden stand. "Where's the wagon?"

Magdelene pointed at the ceiling, impressed by his attitude. She'd had one or two supposed adults fall gibbering to the carpet.

Juan looked up. Dark red runes had been scrawled across the rough boards of the ceiling. "What's that writing on there?"

"The spell that allows this room to exist."

"Oh." He had little or no interest in spells. "Got any more juice?"

She handed him a full glass and watched him putter about, poking his nose into everything. Setting his glass down on the book, he pulled open the wardrobe door.

"What's that?"

"It's a demon trapped in a mirror, what's it look like?" She'd hung the mirror on the door that afternoon, figuring H'sak was safer there than in the wagon.

"How long's he been in there?"

"Twelve years."

"How long you gonna keep him in there?"

"Until I let him out."

An answer that would have infuriated an adult, suited Juan fine. He took one last admiring look at H'sak, finished his juice, and handed Magdelene the empty glass. "I better get home."

"Juan."

About to step through the canvas walls, he glanced back over his shoulder.

"You still haven't told me if I can fix your arm."

His gaze slid over to the demon and then back to the wizard. He shrugged. "Maybe later," he said, and left.

Magdelene spent most of the next three days with Carlos. The children treated her like an exotic curiosity and she tried to live up to their expectations. The adults treated her with a wary suspicion and she tried *not* to live up to theirs. Carlos treated her like a friend.

The oldest in the village by a good twenty years, his eyes sometimes twinkled and sparkled and looked no older than Juan's. Sometimes they burned with more mature fires and she longed to give him back his youth if only for a few hours behind the dunes. Sometimes they appeared deeper and blacker and wiser than the night sky. Sometimes they just looked old. Marvelling, she realized that he remembered all the ages he had been and more, that they were with him still, making a home, not a prison, of his age. This was his strength, and Magdelene placed the lesson it taught her carefully away with her other precious things.

She began to hope the village had a place for her.

In the morning of the fourth day, they'd gathered about the well — the wizard and the few adults who remained ashore due to age or disability — when the high-pitched shriek of a child jerked all heads around.

"Riders!"

Screaming out the news of their discovery, Juan and three of the other children burst into the centre of the village. The chickens panicked, screeched, and scattered. The adults tried to make sense out of the cacophony.

"One at a time!" The baker finally managed to make himself heard. "Juan, what happened?"

"Riders, uncle!" Juan told him, bouncing in his excitement. "Five of them. On horses. Coming here!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes! We were going up the track to look for gooseberries..." The other three children nodded vigorously in agreement. "...and we met them coming down."

"They aren't traders?"

Juan sighed in exaggerated exasperation. "Uncle, I seen traders before. And these aren't..." He noticed the baker was no longer looking at him, noticed no one was looking at him, so he let the last

word trail off and he turned.

They rode slowly, with a ponderous certainty more threatening than a wild charge. Voluminous robes in tans and browns hid all but their eyes and each wore a long, curved blade. They stopped, the line of horses reflecting the line of the well, and the rider in the center let the fabric drop from his face.

Nice, thought Magdelene, continuing to stroke the black and white cat sprawled across her lap. *Good cheek bones, flashing eyes, full lips, and,* she realized, shoulders drooping a little in disappointment, *about as congenial as H'sak.*

"We have come," said the rider, "for the kayle."

Carlos stepped forward, his hand on Juan's shoulder — both to support himself and to keep the boy from doing anything rash. "What do you have to trade?" he asked levelly.

"Your lives," replied the rider and his hand dropped to the hilt of his sword.

Magdelene rolled her eyes. She'd never much cared for melodrama.

"If you take the kayle, we will have nothing when the traders come."

"The traders will not come. The Warlord rules here."

"I don't recall being conquered," Carlos snapped, temper showing at last.

The rider smiled, showing perfect teeth and no sense of humor. "You are being conquered now." The line of horses took a single step in intimidating unison.

Juan's one hand curled into a fist.

Magdelene stood, dumping the indignant cat to the ground.

"Just one minute," she began.

"SILENCE, WOMAN!" the rider thundered.

"Stuff a sock in it." She brushed cat hair off her skirt. "You're not impressing anyone."

For just an instant, acute puzzlement replaced the rider's belligerent expression. A people in the process of being terrorized simply did not behave in this fashion. With a perceivable effort, he regained his scowl and drew his sword. To either side, his men did the same.

"Kill them all," he said.

The horses leapt forward and vanished.

The saddles and the riders hung in the air for one long second then crashed to the ground, raising great clouds of dust and more panicked squawcking from the chickens.

"And as you want the kayle so badly," Magdelene said.

Steel swords became silver fish making desperate attempts to get free of the grip on their tails.

The children laughed and pointed.

When they found they couldn't release the fish, the riders began to panic.

"When you get back to your warlord," Magdelene told them smiling pleasantly, "you'll be able to let go. If I can make a suggestion, don't waste any time. Very shortly those fish are not going to be the best of travelling companions."

Throwing garbage and clots of dirt, the children chased the riders from the village.

Magdelene turned and saw four of the five adults regarding her with awe. Carlos merely looked thoughtful.

"With luck, they'll convince their warlord that this village is more trouble than it's worth," Magdelene explained reassuringly, rubbing at the beads of sweat between her breasts. "Unless he has a wizard of his own, he'll only be beaten again if he comes back." She didn't add that even if he did have a wizard, he'd still be beaten — it sounded too much like bragging. Even though it was true.

"And without luck?" Carlos prodded.

Magdelene sighed. "Without luck, I'll just have to convince him myself. But I hope he does the sensible thing."

Carlos snorted. "Men who style themselves 'The Warlord' seldom do the sensible thing."

"Men in general seldom do the sensible thing." Magdelene winked at the baker who had, after all, only lost one leg at sea. "Fortunately, they have other uses."

Carlos cackled wildly. The baker blushed.

"...although you did say you'd keep out of what didn't concern you."

"My home concerns me."

Yolanda peered at Magdelene through a cloud of pipe smoke. "Home is it? I thought you were just staying for a while?"

"The village needs me."

"We neither need nor want you taking care of us," the older woman growled.

"Good. Because I wasn't planning to." Even through the smoke, she could see Yolanda's eyes narrow. The five empty saddles had been piled by the well when the fishing fleet returned. "I'll be like the seawall. Just another buffer against the storms." She spread her arms. "Without me, the persecutions your people left could well follow them."

"This warlord could send others," Carlos pointed out, pulling himself to his feet on the wizard's shoulder. "We have no way to defend ourselves."

"I can be your defenses," Magdelene insisted.

Yolanda's teeth ground against her pipe stem. "You could use your power to enslave us."

"I could...But why would I bother?"

She sounded so sincerely puzzled that Carlos began to laugh. "She's right," he cackled. "The only thing she'd rather do than lie in the sun is..." Just what exactly Magdelene would rather do than lie in the sun got lost in a violent coughing fit but more than one stupid grin was hastily hidden.

"I thought I'd build a house on the headland," Magdelene said firmly, shooting Carlos a look that almost set him off again. "If no one has any objection."

"Humph." Yolanda's snort brought with it another cloud of smoke. Magdelene couldn't be sure, but she thought there was a smile behind it. "Well, if grandfather is so certain, I've no objection."

The headman sighed. "Does anyone *else* wish to offer an objection?" he asked mildly. Yolanda glared at the assembled villagers who wisely remained silent. "In that case," he inclined his head graciously, "you may build as you wish, Lady-wizard."

Magdelene studied the designs she'd drawn on the bare rock of the headland then checked them against the originals in the book. Although her hair and bright yellow shift blew wildly about in the wind, the pages of the spellbook remained still and not one grain of the fine white sand she'd used for the parameters of her house shifted. The moment Juan returned from the beach she'd be able to finish. She could have just lifted the last bit of sand she needed but the boy had wanted to help. If she let him hang around, she figured she'd eventually do something he considered worthy and he'd let her fix his arm.

She turned her face to the sun, eyes half closed in blissful anticipation of actually having a place of her own. No more travelling and no more adventures. Adventures were highly overrated as far as Magdelene was concerned as they usually included uncomfortable sleeping arrangements, primitive or nonexistent toilet facilities, and someone — or

someones — in direct and often violent opposition.

"Magdelene!"

Jolted out of her reverie, she squinted at the tiny figure scrambling up the steep path from the beach. It wasn't Juan for the child had two healthy arms he...no, she...flailed about for balance.

"The riders," the litle girl panted as Magdelene reached down to pull her the last few feet. "They've come back."

So, the warlord hadn't taken the hint. "Don't worry about it," the wizard advised, holding a hankie to a nose obediently blown. "That's why I'm here."

"But they've got Juan!"

"What?!" Magdelene spun around and stared down at the village, the distant scene snapping suddenly into clarity at the touch of her will. Not the same riders, but the same type, their robes of tan and brown billowing in the wind. A full two dozen men faced the well this time, a red pennant snapping about over their heads as if trying to leap from the lance time. One horse stood a little forward and Juan had been thrown across the pommel of its saddle, his good arm twisted cruelly back.

She could see the villagers gathering — the kayle run had stopped and the seas had been too high to put out for a less certain catch. Carlos — the headman and Yolanda at his back — stepped out of the crowd and spoke. Magdelene could see his lips move although the wind whipped away the words. Juan began to struggle and squirm.

The rider's grip shifted, and it didn't take a wizard's ears to hear the high-pitched scream that rose on the wind.

"Magdelene!" The little girl tugged on the wizard's shift. "You gotta do something!"

Juan went limp.

Magdelene's fingers closed on the child's shoulder, and the next instant the two of them stood by the well. The child tore herself out of Magdelene's hold and dashed to her mother.

"Did you see, Mama? Did you see? We went poof!"

Alone now, between the villagers and the riders, Magdelene took a deep breath, clamped her teeth, and forced the wobbling world to steady. The last time she'd used the transit spell, she'd puked her guts out upon arrival. This time she couldn't give in to the nausea; retching at the warlord's feet might be unpleasant but it could hardly be considered intimidating. When she regained her ability to focus, most of the riders still wore expressions of combined fear and disbelief.

Only the man who held Juan looked unaffected.

He smiled down at her. "You must be the wizard," he said.

She returned the smile with equal sincerity. "And you must be the warlord."

"I got your message. I'm here to give you my answer. And," his eyes narrowed, "I wouldn't suggest a repeat of the last incident, not while I have the boy."

Magdelene wasn't particularly worried. She could send the warlord and his men back where they came from without disturbing a hair on Juan's head. The problem was, they'd only come back. If she played to the Warlord's ego, she might be able to negotiate a more permanent solution. "What do you want?"

"You." His smile broadened, the scar that split one side of his mouth twisting his face unevenly.

Magdelene's brows reached for her hairline. "I beg your pardon?"

"I have decided I could use a wizard." He waved his free hand expansively. "You are to put yourself under *my* command."

Pompous bloody twit. He actually sounded as if she should be thrilled with the opportunity. She folded her arms and glared up at him. "Why would I want to do that?" she demanded.

"If you don't, I will kill the boy."

"And if I do?"

"I will spare both the boy and the village."

"Magdelene..." Carlos' voice sounded strained, all the laughter gone from it.

"It's all right, Carlos," Magdelene muttered out of the corner of her mouth. "I've got things under control." Or she would have shortly. A man who expected his mere presence to overwhelm all opposition could be dealt with.

"While I appreciate your very generous offer," she told him, preparing to launch a special effects extravaganza that would convince him to never tangle with *her* village again, "I'm afraid I shall have to decline."

His smile never wavered. "Pity," he said. Throwing one arm about the boy's upper body, he grabbed the small head and twisted.

The crack sounded very loud.

Juan's body slid to the ground to lie in a crumpled heap, the head bent around at an impossible angle.

Magdelene's mouth worked but no sound emerged. She hadn't really believed he would do that. Behind her, she heard a wail of grief from Juan's mother.

The warlord's men moved forward until they surrounded the villagers with a wall of steel.

"Now," said the warlord, still smiling, "what have you to say to my most generous offer?"

The smile slipped as Magdelene raised her head and met his eyes.

'"Die," she told him.

He didn't have time to look surprised. His eyes rolled up, his mouth went slack, and he collapsed forward over the pommel. Startled by this new limp weight, the horse tossed its head and shied sideways, dumping the warlord's body to the sand beside the small heap of bones and flesh that had been Juan.

In silence that followed, the breathing of the surrounding horses sounded unnaturally loud. Their riders made no sound at all, each hoping desperately that the wizard would not now turn her attention to him.

The silence grew and stretched, broken only by the sobbing of Juan's mother. Pushing her hair back off her face with a trembling hand, Magdelene knelt by the boy's body. She straightened his tangled limbs and gently turned his head until it sat naturally once again.

"Lady-wizard..." It was the first time Carlos hadn't used her name. "...this isn't to say you haven't done what you felt you had to in removing this man from the world, but..."

He fell silent as Magdelene took Juan's cold little hand in hers and called his name.

The slight chest began to rise and fall. Juan hiccupped and opened his eyes.

"I wasn't here," he said, scratching his nose.

"That's right." Magdelene was a firm believer in telling children the truth. "You were dead."

"Oh." He thought about that for a moment. "It sure was boring."

She moved out of the way as his family rushed forward to claim him. He squirmed, looked disgusted, and tried to avoid the sloppiest displays of affection.

"Mama, stop it."

"Lady-wizard?"

Magdelene turned to face the villagers. They'd ask her to leave now. Or they'd deify her. Things wouldn't be the same. She stifled a near hysterical giggle. People so often over-reacted to the raising of the dead.

"If you can bring back Juan," the headman told her quietly, "you must bring back the warlord and right the wrong you've done."

"Wrong?"

"We don't believe in the taking of life." He glanced down at the warlord's body and his lip curled. "As much as we may recognize the emotion that prompts it." Behind him, the villagers stared at her, no two expressions the same.

She heaved a sigh of relief. If that was all they wanted, they were taking it rather well. Maybe she could still salvage the situation. "But what of that lot?" Magdelene shot a glance back over her shoulder at the warlord's men who tried very hard to appear harmless and insignificant. "Cut the head off a snake and the snake dies. If I rejoin the head then the snake lives and eats the heads of others and..." She frowned, lost in the metaphor, and sighed again. "Look, I don't think it's a good idea."

"If you want to make this your home," Yolanda told her bluntly, as unaffected by miracles as she was by most things, "you must respect our beliefs."

"But he deserved to die."

A couple of the villagers nodded in agreement. Yolanda stood firm. "You have no more right to decide that about him than he did about Juan. If you wish us to respect you, you must respect us."

Was it as easy as that? Magdelene wrapped her arms about herself and thought it over.

"Does your warlord have a name?" she asked the riders at last.

They looked at each other and then down at the body of their leader.

"Anwar, Lady-wizard," ventured the young man who held the lance with the warlord's pennant. She smiled her thanks and he began breathing again.

Squatting by the warlord's body, Magdelene took his hand in hers and called. She didn't bother to make him more comfortable first.

This time, she wouldn't underestimate him.

His eyes opened. He looked around, slowly untangled himself, and sat up. "Bleshnaggle?" he asked, grabbing for a blowing strand of Magdelene's hair.

She pulled it out of his hand and stood. The warlord pouted for a second then discovered his boots. He gazed at them in fascination, babbling nonsense words and patting at the air with limp hands.

Everyone, the villagers and the riders, took a step forward.

"What happened?" Yolanda asked finally.

Magdelene watched the warlord trying to catch the billowing end of his own robe. "Death seems to have unsettled him a bit," she said.

"But Juan was fine."

The wizard shrugged. "Children are a lot more adaptable about..."

A dark-haired, pale-skinned young woman appeared suddenly beside the warlord, hands on hip and eyes flashing. "Would you make up your mind!" Her black robes hung straight to the sand, unaffected by any breeze. "What are we playing, musical souls? First I've got 'em, then I don't. You're not supposed to do that!" She spotted Juan worming his way to the front of the crowd. "Hi, kid."

Juan's mother grabbed his ear and yanked him behind her, cutting off his cheerful greeting. As far as she could see there was no one there, and her baby had been involved with quite enough strangeness for one afternoon.

"Death?" Magdelene hazarded.

Everyone, the riders and the villagers, took a step back. A this point, they were willing to take the wizard's word for it.

"Good guess," Death snapped. "Now, do you want to explain what's going on around here?"

"It's a long story."

"Look, lady," Death began, a little more calmly.

"Magdelene."

"Okay. Magdelene. Look, Magdelene, I haven't got time for a long story, I've got places to go, people to see. Let's make a deal — you can keep the kid but tall, dark, and violent comes with me." She pointed a long, pale finger down at the warload. Both her ebony brows rose as he pulled off a boot and began filling it with sand. "Now look what you've done!" she wailed, causing every living creature in earshot to break into a cold sweat. "You've broken him!"

"Sorry." Magdelene spread her hands.

"No you're not." Death tapped one foot against the sand. "Okay. I'm sure we can work this out like sensible women. You can keep him, just give me one of them." She swept her gaze over the riders.

One sensitive young man fainted, falling forward in the saddle, arms dangling limply down each side of his horse's neck.

"Sorry," Magdelene said again, lifting her shoulders in a rueful shrug. "They're not mine to give. Why don't you just take one?"

Three saddles were suddenly wet.

"I don't work that way." Death shook her head. "I can't take someone if it isn't their time."

"Lady?"

Both Death and the wizard turned.

Carlos stepped forward, one twisted hand held out before him.

Death's expression softened and she smiled. She had a beautiful smile. "Don't I know you?" she asked softly.

"You should," Carlos told her. "I've been expecting you for some time."

Her voice became a caress. "Forgive me for taking so long."

When she took his hand, he sighed and all the aches and pains of his age seemed to drop off him. He stood straight for a moment, his face serene, then he crumpled to the ground.

All eyes were on the body of the old man. Only Magdelene saw the young one, tall and strong, who still held Death's hand. Lips trembling, she gave him her best smile. He returned it. And was gone.

Magdelene stood quietly, tears on her cheeks, while the villagers lovingly carried Carlos' body away. She stood quietly while the warlord's men managed to get their leader onto his horse, and she didn't move as they headed out of the village. She stood quietly until a small hand slipped into hers.

"I've got the rest of the sand," Juan told her, a bulging pouch hung round his neck. "Can we go finish your house now?"

She looked down and lightly touched his hair. "They want me to stay?"

He shrugged, unsure who *they* were. "No one wants you to go."

Hand in hand, they climbed the path to the headland.

"Are you going to stay here forever?" Juan asked.

Magdelene met the anxious look in his black eyes and grinned. "How old are you, Juan?"

"Nine."

The image of the young man she'd pulled from the future stood behind the child and winked. She shooed it back where it belonged. "I'll be around long enough."

Juan nodded, satisfied.

"So...I took you back from Death today. Ready to let me fix your arm now?"

He tossed his head. "I'm still thinkin' about it."

The most powerful wizard in the world stared down at him in astonishment then started to laugh. "You," she declared, "are one hard kid to impress." ❧

FRIENDS OF DARKOVER
P.O.Box 72
Berkeley, CA 94701

The Friends of Darkover is a non-profit, non-dues-paying, disjointed, un-mustered group representing the span from the golden season to the golden years, and from the golden mean to the gilded extreme. We calculate the membership, whenever we do, by using a complicated mathematical formula dividing the number of opinions expressed in MZB's mail by a percentage of the last postage hike....

Where to reach MZB: You can write to Mrs. Bradley c/o The Friends of Darkover — we generally show her any interesting letters in any case. You may or may not get a reply; it depends on how busy she is writing novels at the time. Letters written either to her or to the Friends are subject to publication in the newsletter unless you specify in your letter that you do not want it printed. All letters MUST be typed. Mrs. Bradley has had eye surgery and cannot read handwriting or dot-matrix printing.

Conventions: The Friend of Darkover is no longer putting on the Fantasy Worlds Festival. The annual Grand Council Meeting is held on the East Coast each November. An address for information about the Grand Council is given below.

Publications: Several newsletters are published by Darkover fans, most notably *The Darkover Newsletter*. Others include *Contes de Cottman IV*, a fiction zine, and *Moon Phases*, a fanzine. Send them a SASE for more information.

The Darkover Newsletter is issued quarterly. The cost is $7.00 for a four-issue subscription ($10.00 in Canada, $17.00 foreign). Payment must be either a check in U.S. funds drawn on a U.S. bank or a postal money order in U.S. dollars, payable to MZB Enterprises.

Back issues of *The Darkover Newsletter*: send SASE for availability and price.

Books: There is a Berkeley bookstore which carries MZB's books and will search for out-of-print ones, so you can write to them for anything you can't find locally. Whenever you write for information, please remember to enclose a SASE (Self-Addressed Stamped Envelope — and you thought envelopes didn't know how to write!).

Those Addresses:

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2433 Channing Way
Berkeley CA 94704

Men Without Maps

by Darrell Schweitzer and Jason Van Hollander

"I have been a soldier all my life," Jyrim said. "Truly, *all* of it. It is the doing of the gods. When I was very small, the people of my village cursed the gods and refused to respect the divine. The altars were overthrown, the priests slain. But I was too young to understand that. I only knew that, perhaps sent to reinstill some of that lost respect, the pestilence came. Everyone, my parents, my brothers, everyone in my whole world died of it. The crystalline sickness. They stood still that last morning as the sun rose. They continued to ridicule the gods, all the while *gleaming* in the morning light, their faces, their naked bodies — for in the last stages of the disease, of course, the sufferer is tormented by bodily heat and so is often found naked in the end — and they just stood there, as I am sure they stand now. But I could still walk. I did not gleam. Naked, though, I ran out of my world, across the plain, into the unknown vastness. Soldiers found me. At first I thought they would eat me, but they adopted me instead, and raised me as the son of the whole regiment. So I am one who had a thousand fathers and no mother. For I was reborn that day and became, to the exclusion of all else, a soldier."

The old man settled wearily into the dust, leaning against a fallen column. Around him, the temple ruin was still, open to the bright sun.

"But you no longer wear the sword and the plume. You are no longer a soldier." The old woman sat beside him.

"I have lectured too much. My misfortune has made me pedantic. Tell me of yourself first."

"You are no longer a soldier," she insisted. Her white hair stirred in the faint breeze. Out across the desert, dust devils rose, danced.

"I was mustered out because of my age. I am cut adrift. Utterly."

"You have your pension."

"A pittance. Gone."

"I too am not what I once was," she said. "I too..." She paused and leaned over where she sat, tracing with her finger in the sand. Then she straightened up suddenly and continued speaking. "We are well met, we two. I, also, am sure the gods are responsible. Even here, in godless Tamarack, where men have no more use for the divine. Instead, they serve commerce. But when I was a young girl I dwelt in this temple. Nay, ruled over it. I was the pythoness."

"And now?"

"My snake died. No one brought me another. Therefore, prophecy ceased. I think that was what people wanted all along."

"And I still have —" The soldier reached behind the pillar and lifted out an almost hairless, blind monkey by the scruff of the neck. It glared at him, its eyes pink and puffy, its skin a sickly gray, streaked with purple veins. The creature screeched, snapped. "Yes, yes, I know," the soldier said. He took a piece of fruit out of his travel bag, chewed it, and gave the pulp to the beast.

"A magical creature," the woman said.

"A nasty, filthy, mean-spirited one. But, yes, magical. That first morning, as I wandered naked over the plain, I encountered this monkey. I reached out my hand to it, and it bit me, then spoke in something other than words. I knew then that it would accompany me always, that I must never allow it to come to harm. I had no idea why."

"And you still don't?"

"Oh, it served me well enough. Every time it bit me, for the price of a little blood I was granted a vision, some foreknowledge of my foes' armaments or strategy, or just where the next meal was coming from. It kept me alive. I don't doubt that. But now, since I am no longer a soldier, those visions likewise no longer come. We are useless together, the two of us."

The monkey finished eating and crawled into the travel bag, searching for more fruit. Jyrim yanked it out by the tail. The creature hissed, turned, and bit him viciously on the forearm. Blood flowed. Resignedly, Jyrim let the monkey lick its fill.

"Has this marvelous creature a name?"

"Joot. It is called Joot. If that ever meant anything, I've long since forgotten what. A nonsense noise."

"Jyrim and Joot. What a pair. Come here, Joot," the old woman said softly, cooing as if addressing a beloved child. "It is destiny that we are here today." She held out her hands, lifted the monkey's own, and the creature came to her in a kind of dance. To Jyrim the soldier she said, "I have waited many years for this."

"If you want my monkey, take it." he said, too numb of mind even to be astonished.

"Oh no. It stays with you, but on this day I shall deliver my final prophecy. I need a magical animal to do that. When I writhed, wrapped in the living serpent, the dreams of the gods filled me with fire. Now, with this monkey in my lap, perhaps I can rekindle a single coal."

Jyrim watched the dust-devils.

"You shall travel but a little ways," she said. "I, not at all. Yet we shall both arrive at the same place."

"That's it?"

"I've been out of practice. Besides, the gods have long since fled Tamarack."

"Explain then." Unthinking, he reached into his bag and got out another piece of fruit and offered it to her.

The prophetess sighed. "You don't need to reward me. My reward is that I may die now, tonight or tomorrow, having prophesied one last time. You, I foresee, shall become a soldier one last time. That is all I see."

"Then I die too?" Jyrim laughed bitterly. "The grave is the place we both shall come to. I could have told you that. Behold, I'm a prophet myself. "

The monkey Joot sniffed the fruit, grabbed, and bit, nipping Jyrim's fingers again.

He left her sitting there in the midday sun. The temple ruins offered no shade for anything larger than a scorpion. There

was no reason to linger. Throughout the afternoon he trudged slowly across the Zydar desert, away from godless Tamarack, bound he knew not where. The monkey led him. Blind as it was, it seemed to know the way, scrambling across the dunes, its worn leather leash trailing in the sand.

The dust-devils writhed like the serpents of prophecy, but spoke not.

In the evening, the sky darkened to blood red, then purpled, then faded to black. The sand was their bed that night. Jyrim and the monkey lay down near the base of a dune, out of the wind. Jyrim thought to light a fire, for warmth, then realized with chagrin he had nothing to burn and no way to start a fire anyway.

Joot laughed, exposing jagged, blackened teeth.

"Show some sympathy for an old comrade," Jyrim said. "Just this once."

The monkey made a particular barking sound which meant it wanted food.

"Very well then." Jyrim reached into the bag. He swatted his hand against the inside of it, startled. The bag was empty.

He merely lay down. The monkey found its way to him and cuddled in his arms, as if for warmth, then, as if it had forgotten something, broke free and bit him on the elbow.

"I am bleeding all over our bed," Jyrim said, only half awake.

How old was this little animal? He wondered. It had been with him...sixty years? Was that it? Surely Joot was, as the pythoness had discerned, a supernatural monkey, attached to him for some obscure reason. Now that the food was gone, now that he did not even know the way to the next city, now that he had utterly failed to make a living in Tamarack —

"Can your monkey do *tricks*?" everyone demanded. No, it could not, or would not. It merely snapped.

Now he would wander but a little way, lie down even as he did now, and die. Not much of a prophecy. An interesting paradox, though. The woman said that without a magical creature, be it snake or monkey, she could not prophesy. But with the monkey in her lap, she made no more than a commonplace guess. Yet the creature *was* magical. How else could it have lived so long? The visions. She had said he would be a soldier once more. That didn't make any sense. But then, prophecy never did...It was something to hope for, though. More than anything else, he longed to resume the profession of arms, if only long enough to die, so at least he would be *someone* and not just refuse.

The monkey woke him in the middle of the night, tugging gently on his ear with its teeth. Abruptly, he sat up. Joot's unseeing eyes were wide open, fixed on some distant point in space.

"What is it, old companion?"

Above, stars gleamed in a pure band of fire from horizon to horizon. The Pathway of the Gods, it was called, brightest in summer, dim in winter. There were no gods now. They had fled Tamarack, unappreciated, useless, even as he and the monkey were useless. Odd, that he should find himself pitying the gods.

It could be worse, he told them in his thoughts. The gods of Zhamiir were actually *sold at auction* to curiosity-seekers from far and wide. All over the world, men rose up and shrugged off religion like an old coat.

"But I am an old man and shall retain the out-of-date fashion," he said aloud, to the night air. "I shall be guided by the stars, each of which represents, we are told, a mile we must traverse in this forced march which is our life."

"March no farther. Die. Only die!"

He looked up, startled by this other voice. A giant of a man in a plume-crested helmet and black armor stood on the top of the dune. He knew that voice, that form. It was Agiros, the Zhamiiri champion he had slain in the pass before Great Bull Mountain, thirty years before. That had been the proudest day of his life. How both armies had roared when he stood up from the dust, covered with blood, the head of his foe dangling from his upraised fist.

Now that head seemed to be back on Agiros' shoulders.

"Are you a ghost?"

"I merely am."

Bewildered, Jyrim rose and climbed to the top of the dune. He stood before Agiros and said, "If you are a restless ghost then, I beg you, forgive me for slaying you, and find your rest."

Agiros spat.

"Coward. No soldier ever apologizes for killing —

"— any more than he apologizes for breathing," Jyrim said, concluding the proverb. "So be it then. Have you come to fight?"

Metal rasped. Agiros drew his sword. Jyrim knelt, to allow Agiros to strike off his head. He had no weapon. He was too tired.

The sword thudded into the sand in front of him.

"Pick it up and fight. Or else give me the monkey."

"What?"

"I shall tear your little beast limb from filthy limb. I shall grind its foul flesh between my teeth, which is no more than the monster deserves. I am sure the thought has crossed your mind too."

Now Jyrim had a weapon — and strength. He rose in rage and charged his opponent, who had somehow armed himself with shield and spear. Jyrim shouted. He slashed wildly with the sword, staggering, coughing, gasping for breath as the cold night air tore his lungs. His enemy toyed with him, never allowing him within striking distance, tripping him with the point of the spear.

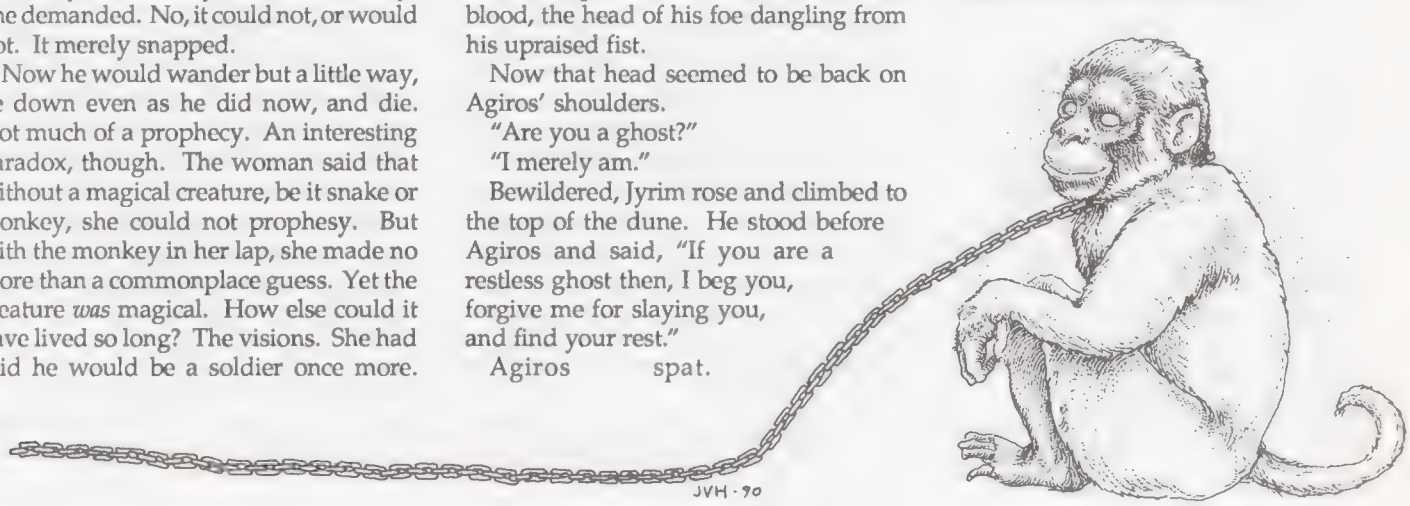
And Jyrim lay very still, his eyes closed but for a slit, more listening than watching as Agiros approached.

"Dead already?" Agiros prodded him with the spear.

Much of soldiering, he repeated to himself again and again, is not brute strength but strategy. The essence of strategy is knowing when to wait.

Agiros prodded him with the spear, then put his foot on Jyrim's chest.

As quick as a striking viper, Jyrim grabbed the spear and jammed the point into his foeman's calf. Agiros let out a bellow, but before he could



even fall, Jyrim had rammed his sword upward, into his enemy's groin. When Agiros fell, it was silently.

Jyrim laughed. "Don't you remember...? That's how I did it the first time I killed you."

But there was only sand, a formation atop the dune which vaguely resembled the fallen giant. Wind quickly effaced it.

A dream, then? No, it was not that. The sword of Agiros was still in his hand, and quite solid.

He called down to where Joot still lay in the sand.

"Come, comrade. Our destiny is upon us. Come."

The monkey did not rise. Bewildered, afraid in a way he could not explain to himself, Jyrim hurried down the dune. He tucked the sword into his belt and picked up Joot. The creature was still warm.

For an instant, he almost wept. The reaction surprised him. Then the monkey stirred, ripped open one of the scabs on his forearm, and lapped his blood.

"Yes," he said. "Refresh yourself. Our campaign is not yet over. You are welcome to my meager provisions. Yes."

Bewildered, delirious with expectation, with a kind of madness, Jyrim staggered across the dunes, trying to follow a star, then putting the monkey down and following its random meanderings.

"Tomorrow, when the sun rises," he said, "we shall roast our brains, you and I. Let us have our last adventure tonight then. No time for sleeping now! No! Sleep all you want when the lizards play among our bones."

Destiny in the billion stars, he thought. The gods walk the gleaming pathway yet! I am led by the blind eyes of a brainless monkey. So be it!

He shouted, waving the sword of Agiros.

He bellowed a camp song he had learned that very first evening when the regiment adopted him.

"We march to the fight! March to the foe!
March into blood! March into death!
Blood of the fallen! Staining our boots!
March like the thunder! We don't give a damn!"

Everything was suddenly hilarious. His laughter was a soldier's laugh; now a hearty roar to raise his spirits before some terrible battle. Let it be that, yes.

Then, just as suddenly, his laughter sounded like a foreign language, and he forgot everything, even who he was. He sat down again, in the darkness beneath the stars, and sighed.

The monkey scrambled into his lap. He scratched the creature gently behind the ears.

"Why do you stay with me, old friend? What ineffable mystery do you represent?"

The phosphor-man found him next. Gleaming, like a skeleton delicately constructed of wind-borne embers, this newcomer beckoned, then led him for many hours of silent, deliberate march through the Zydar Desert while above the Pathway of the Gods wheeled slowly through the sky.

He came to a military camp. There in the desert, the remnant of some ancient massacre, stood broken walls and huts, overturned wagons, and even the remains of tents. It was all years, even centuries old, but the desert had not managed to erase it.

Appalled, he allowed himself to be led through the gate. He held the monkey in his arms now, the sword still in his belt.

Then he saw the corpses: a bemedalled skeleton in a uniform he recognized, even if he could not remember if it was that of friend or foe. It hardly seemed to matter now. Yet the problem turned in his mind, over and over. The skeleton still held a curving sword in its bony grip. Nearby, a standard-bearer actually stood, his shrivelled remains somehow supported by or entangled in his standard which was still rammed upright into the ground. The image on the standard was, ironically, that of a crowned, possibly divine monkey.

Bones and military tunics littered the ground, half buried in sand; here a shattered breastplate, there a cloven helmet, again, a broken spear. He supposed that the victors had carried off most of the still usable weapons.

Above the bones were shimmers of light, and nightdrifts, sand borne on the faint wind, struggling to gain form. Phosphor-things like great wading birds with human faces stalked through the camp, knee-deep in the sand, graceful, silent, almost totally transparent. All was vagueness: feeble breezes whisking dusk into the sky, into the clouds. Clouds sailed backward into the waning, just-risen moon.

Ghostly trumpets blared. Just as suddenly, the phosphor-man broke up into thousands of individual sparks, scattered, and was gone.

And the dead rose, the skeletons coming together, bone unto bone, sinew rejoining sinew, flesh reconstituting itself out of the dust. They stood up on thousands in the darkness, filling the camp, their eyes gleaming like stars.

He knew them all, every last one, as men he had slain over the years in countless battles. So many, he thought, sacrificed to the trivial result that I should survive long enough to die in the sun with my monkey tomorrow. Ah, the randomness, of a world without gods, like a ship drifting with no one to steer her, *those* ways are infinitely and hopelessly strange.

Men without maps, he thought, wandering hopelessly across a barren world, a place devoid of the miraculous. For the gods had been driven from Tamarack, and had been sold at auction in Zhamiir. Here the temples were made the haunts of lizards.

The resurrected host advanced in step, took another step, and another.

Joot screeched in fear and climbed onto his shoulders, clinging to his neck. It was clear to him now. This monkey was the last fragment of the numinous left in the world, the last miraculous thing, tawdry as it was, and the envious dead would take it from him, would tear it to little bits so each could have a desperately desired, yet useless piece, which would not nourish, or heal, or restore.

So he fought them throughout the night, shouting his warcry. He struck off a leg, an arm, a head. With many a straight thrust he pierced breastplate and ribs, and bones clattered to earth over his forearm like a little avalanche. A desiccated skull fell at his feet, snapping. He snatched off its helmet and put it on his own head. He took a shield from fallen foe, and once, while his enemies milled around in seeming confusion, he actually managed to strap a breastplate over his ragged clothing.

All the while the monkey screeched and clawed at his neck and bit his ears and face till blood ran down his cheeks. The temptation was almost overwhelming to cast it away, to smash it underfoot in the fury of the moment, so he could get on with the fighting undistracted. But time and time again he reminded himself that he was fighting *for* this monkey, to carry out the commands of the divine monkey which had first been given to

him on that plain so long ago, as he fled naked from the death of his world. He must preserve the monkey. He must aid it on its journey to no destination he could ever discern, for no purpose he could ever understand.

Yet that purpose was enough. A soldier followed *orders*. He followed *orders* where before there had only been random, senile misery. He felt almost young again.

Foes fell before him like wheat before the reaper. He remembered all his old tricks, old moves, old tactics. This opposing army was lost. These men were indeed without maps, without direction or purpose, but he, at last, was not. Despite their numbers, he had the advantage. He thanked the absent gods. He even thanked Joot.

At the very last the few survivors cried out in a single voice and vanished like smoke in the morning wind.

As the eastern sky lightened, Jyrim stood amid the ruins, once more a confused old man. Even the corpses of his fallen enemies were no more than suggestions of shapes in the sand, soon erased by dawn's breath. But, again, it had been no illusion. He still held Agiros's sword in his hand. He wore a dented helmet and a breastplate so tarnished with dirt and old blood it was almost black.

Bleeding from many wounds, he fell to his knees, then lay back against a fallen pillar. His blood splattered on the sand.

It was impossible, he told himself. He had gone nowhere at all. This was the temple of the pythoness, not a ruined camp.

He felt a special pain at the base of his neck and reached back. An arrow was embedded there, in the muscle. He couldn't get the barbs out, and so broke off the shaft. Only then did he discover that this arrow, loosed at him from behind, had impaled his monkey, which hung dead, spitted on the shaft like some small game animal ready to be roasted over a fire.

He wept, deeply and truly, as he cradled the dead monkey in his lap. His tears mingled with his blood and fell on the little, distorted, bug-eyed face.

The prophetess knelt before him. She took the dead monkey into her own hands.

"So is my final prophecy completed," she said softly.

"I don't understand." He gasped for breath, swallowed, tried to force words. He watched his blood spreading over the hard-packed sand. He was very weak now. "Was it some kind of dream?"

"It was foretold," she said, "and in the foretelling, what happened, happened, the future condensed into a single instant of time."

"Have not hours passed, the whole night? Did I not leave you in the daylight?"

But she only sat beside him, sighed, closed her eyes, and stopped breathing.

"Wait!" he shouted. "You can't just leave! What is this supposed to mean? Explain yourself!" Angrily, he shoved her on the shoulder. Her body toppled.

"Hush. Ask no more questions."

He started, jerking his head up at the new voice. The arrowhead embedded in his neck stabbed painfully.

The thing which had been Joot the monkey crouched in his lap, drinking his blood from where it oozed from behind his breastplate as if from a broken fountain. The little beast was alive again, but changed almost beyond recognition into something that might have been a small, deformed child diffused with cold light, so that it was both grotesque and ineffably beautiful at the same time. As he watched, the apparition grew in size and stood up before him, became as tall as a man, but not at all human, its face that of an ape, its eyes burning so brilliantly white that he could not look upon them. Still his blood stained its chin. Flaming wings spread from the pale-white shoulders. A tail twitched behind, stirring the sand. He somehow found the presence of the tail very reassuring.

He spoke softly, without astonishment. "You are a god."

"I am, yes, concealed in that embryonic form you knew until the fullness of my time was come. Your life has been but my birthing-pangs, old soldier, faithful companion. Even as other lives shall be for many more. Even as men overthrow their old gods, new ones arise in secret. It is the way of things. Gods rise out of the black depths like bubbles in a pool."

Jyrim tried to force himself to his feet. He reached out. But the pain was too great. He fell forward, face-down in the sand, then heaved himself onto his back.

"That's not right," he gasped. "No. *Liar!* Men called you forth, out of their own desires! Yes. *We* created you in the image of our dreams —"

"It hardly matters. Your task is done. Your deeds, your thoughts, your courage, and your blood have all nourished me. Now I shall leave you, even as a young serpent leaves its shattered egg and never turns back."

"Wait! What is there for me? What reward?"

"Haven't you been rewarded already, old soldier?"

"Have I indeed...?"

The god reached down to touch him beneath the chin, like a parent fondling a child.

The light was blinding once again.

Slowly, his vision cleared. He felt as if he were rising on a cloud. The sensation was all too familiar: dizziness from loss of blood, from exertion. But then he stared into the sunken, tear-streaked face of the pythoness.

Somehow, it all seemed hilarious to him. A cruel joke. He laughed to bury the pain. He shouted the old song: *"March! March into blood!...March!...Don't give a damn!...Tear down the cities! Smother our foes!"*

"Soldier, will you take me with you this day into paradise?"

He didn't understand.

"Will you...let me march with you?" she said.

"I — I — Into paradise?"

"Come!" Something about her voice had changed, become less raspy, less harsh. He saw that she had become a young girl in the first flower of her youth, that her hair was dark as the night sky, that her skin was gleaming, olive, almost translucent. Something shrivelled and worn lay at her feet.

"Come!" she said again. She took him by the hand and pulled him up. It was so easy, rising up, as if he were laying aside a huge, heavy cloak. She held his hand and started to lead him over the sand, toward the rising sun.

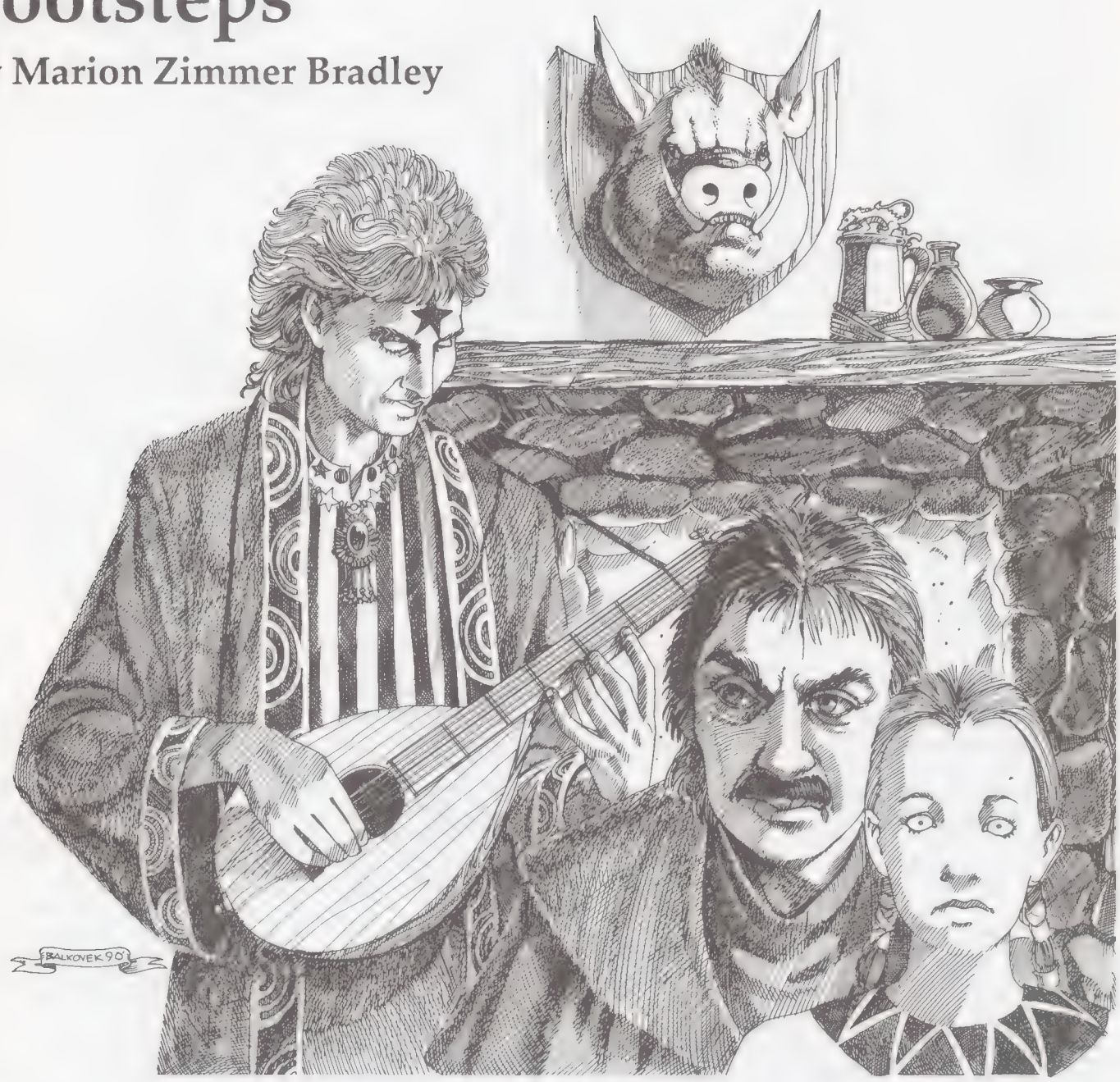
But he lifted her in his dark, strong arms, held her firmly against his golden breastplate. His sword clanged at his side, his shield against his back. He felt the wind ruffling the plumes of his helmet.

He shouted a great shout and ran, carrying her, laughing, toward the vanishing darkness of the night, where lingered the army of the lost, the men without maps. They served no gods. That was their problem, he realized. They were leaderless.

But they were his comrades now, and no soldier ever deserted his fellow-soldiers. He would show them the way.❧

Footsteps

by Marion Zimmer Bradley



Although, among the vows of an Adept of the Blue Star, is that he or she may never be seen to eat or drink by living men, no such vow prevents sleeping in their presence.

The inn at the edge of the Great Moor was lonely and quiet, and yet, for its location, crowded; when Lythande sought shelter from a sudden downpour, it was all too evident that many a traveller had done the same. The best that the innkeeper could do was to offer Lythande the half of a bed in a chamber already occupied.

"I have no gold," Lythande remarked, "but I will sing to your company, in return for even a dry corner, if it must be so."

"Now the heavens forbid any beneath my roof should sleep so," said the innkeeper. "I am well acquainted with magicians; if you will show my guests some of your magic, I will throw in a hearty meal."

"Be it so," said Lythande, although the meal would do her no good in the inn's crowded state. "Yet I call to your attention that I have no gold, but only this small copper coin."

"So be it," said the innkeeper. "At least all men know that Lythande the magician will not stoop to setting a spell by which copper may appear to be gold."

"No," said Lythande, regretting her integrity — for at an inn such as this, a gold

piece would command not a corner by the fire, but the best room in the house, but as she had spoken , so she must do.

So it was that upon the evening, the guests at an otherwise unremarkable inn sat before the fire and heard a tall magician, who looked like any other tall and fair-haired man save for the mage-robe and the Blue Star upon her brow — for her vows commanded Lythande to travel forever in the guise of a man, concealing the woman within — with a lute on her shoulder, singing of fields of roses blossoming in the sun, of garlands and crowns of honor to be won by the brave in contests of valor or strength, songs of milking the cattle, of wandering on the moors, and the sorrow of the sea.

And when Lythande had sung all the songs she knew, a fair young girl said to her, "Surely your songs would steal one's soul."

"Alas, no," said Lythande, remembering when another fair young girl, in another life, had said to her much the same, "I am no stealer of souls."

"No, forsooth," said a dark man wrapped in a dark travelling mantle, seated near the fire, "Yonder magician is no soul-stealer, that is plain to see."

"I am not," Lythande said, "nor, if that art were known to me would I so defile a lute."

"Is that art known to any man beneath the Twin Suns?" said the man.

But Lythande sensed by that prickling of the blue star between her brows that some magic other than her own was nearby. She said, gazing at the dark man with all the power of which she was capable, "Tell me, are you yourself a soul-stealer?"

"If I were," said the man, "should I be likely to proclaim it here, in your presence, magician?"

"Most likely not," said Lythande. *But I notice you did not deny it either*, she added to herself, resolving that she would not sleep that night; if there were a soul-stealer about, whether this man were he or a perfectly innocent bystander, he would have no chance in Lythande's presence.

"Tell me," said the pretty girl, "such things may have happened — I have heard my grand-dame speak of them. Although they do not befall now, do they? For it would be sad indeed if anyone must go all her days in fear of evil magic."

"Indeed they do not," said Lythande, "nor is magic evil, as you shall see."

"A careless boast," said the dark traveller. "Who are you, Lythande, that you seek to appear before us as a great magician and lead my Mary to be speaking of soul-stealing and the like?"

"Are you, sir, a magician?"

"I make no claims," said the man. "And you?"

"Judge for yourself," said Lythande, for the last thing she wanted was a display of her powers in this company where she felt alien magic was to be found. "Call me but a poor minstrel and juggler. Would it please you, Mary, to see such powers as I have?"

"Indeed it would please me," said Mary, her blue eyes shining. "Though the thought of magic frightens me."

"What you shall see is but juggling and trickery," Lythande reassured her. And then she called the witchfire, showing flames that roared to the roof and became dragons which sang in the voice of a tenor; then she called up a fishbowl of golden fish, who prophesied in the voices of children, and finally flew away like birds; and finally called forth a head, robed and crowned, who told every guest what he wanted most to know, if it was pleasant, and finally forecast the weather: rain for many days to come. The guests begged like children to see more marvels, but Lythande knew the secret of pleasing audiences was to leave them hungry for more, never satiated; so she pleaded weariness and watched the company go to their beds. She would willingly have slept before the fire — she had slept in many worse places — but the innkeeper would not have it.

"If there were a chamber free you should have my best," said he, "but as it is — you shall share with only two latecomers," and he conducted Lythande into a room with the dark traveller and his pretty travelling companion.

And at last — since the only alternative was to stalk haughtily into the rain, which now was falling more heavily than ever— Lythande let herself be persuaded to spread out her cloak in their room, although nothing would persuade her to take a share of either bed.

"No," she said, "truly, the fire will do as well —"

"What, lord magician! Surely you do not believe that I — or my companion here — will steal *your* soul! I have the greatest respect for Adepts of the Blue Star, and not for worlds would I engage in sorcery in their presence." And all the time the pricking of the Star between her brows told her of the action of strange magic.

So she might have turned to young Mary — it would not be the first time one had seemed innocent and been magical — but Mary whispered to her, "Remain, I beg you; in your presence, at least, he cannot force himself upon me."

"I thought him your father, my dear; how come you, then, to be travelling in his company?"

"Father I have had none for many years; I dwell with my grand-dame upon the moor — and would I were back there. When he passed by, I know not how, he said 'come', and I could not help but come, leaving behind my grand-dame and all that I love."

"I shall remain," said Lythande, grateful at least that this girl was not one to whom Lythande's disguise was transparent, but who had appealed to her gallantry.

So, thought Lythande, *the girl is spelled; and I thought rightly that this is a great sorcerer*. Aloud she asked, "Has he offered you any insult?"

"No, lord magician; I have not seen so much as his fingertip beyond that great dark mantle he wears," said Mary.

Lythande was almost sorry; for if he had done so, her vows, which bade her always fight for Law against Chaos, would force a confrontation. But the girl had made no complaint and she could not interfere — nor from the experience of several lifetimes, would she have done so. She was not the first girl, and Lythande did not suppose she would be the last, despite a pretty face and innocence, to be lured away.

And so at last — telling herself that in her presence at least, the girl would suffer no insult from her companion — Lythande stretched out on the floor between the beds, refusing an offered share of the dark man's bed. She removed no garment but her boots, nor did the dark man, still wrapped in his enormous cloak. And so she composed herself for sleep.

But she did not sleep. All the night, conscious of the prickling of the star and

Footsteps

of unknown magic as stealthy as the mice in the walls, she did not sleep, but lay wakeful, conscious of the turning earth and of the snores of at least one of her companions, the soft breaths of the other. At last, toward dawn when pale light began to steal into the room, all fell silent, and Lythande fell into a fitful doze; and though her distrust of her companions was at highest pitch, she did sleep a little.

And from this sleep she was wakened by an almighty clamor on the steps of the inn. A peasant woman, rough-handed, all soaked with the rain, her hair dripping wetly round her shoulder, was pounding at the door.

"Open! Open!" she cried, "wretch, monster, what have you done with my grand-daughter!"

So saying, she rushed past the protesting inn-keeper, who with sleepy astonishment made not much move to prevent her, and to the bed-chambers on the second floor. One by one she examined the sleepers, passing over Lythande and coming to the dark traveller, where she cried, "So! Rascal, devil — this is the man who lured away the child by magic —"

"I? My good woman, your granddaughter, if such she be, followed me of her free will," said the man. "Has she said otherwise?"

"No; but she shall make complaint when she is free — for Mary is a good girl—"

"So says every grandmother, and rightly so," said the dark man. "Ask of her, or of this stranger, if I have stirred from this bed. But toward morning, owing to a disturbed night, Lythande's sleep might have been too heavy to hear what took place." Then the grandmother, rushing to Mary's side, drew back the covers, demanding of her unstirring form that she answer; but Mary lay still, unmoving, and at last the grandmother howled that she was dead. And so indeed she proved to be, without a mark upon her, nor any apparent cause of death.

"It was you nevertheless who slew her with your magic," insisted the grandmother. "Or how did she meet her death?"

"My dear lady, am I to blame if the girl was taken by a vampire, or a restless spirit?" he demanded. "I did not go near her —"

"I slept; I cannot attest to that," said Lythande.

"No; but these can," said the man, dragging off the travelling cloak and betraying two legs withered and like pipestems, "For many years my legs have not borne me a single step without two walking sticks; and even I could not rise and cross this room upon them without awakening the magician here — not even if I were more nimble than any acrobat. How am I capable of doing harm to living man or beast? And you cannot prove I slew her by magic — no more than you could make that claim of the magician himself."

And Lythande realized she had been very neatly mousetrapped; all the guests of the inn had seen Lythande do magic; and if inquiry were made about murder by magic, inquiry might as well turn to Lythande herself, and her identity would soon be exposed. Yet the prickling of her star told her very clearly that some form of magic was in use; he must have slain the girl by the same magic by which he had lured her from her home.

But in that case would he have made jokes about soul-stealers?

Yes; such was his arrogance; he had not said, either, that he had not killed the girl, but only that he was not capable of motion.

So be it; then Lythande would devote herself to proving that he could not, in her very presence, commit a magical murder with impunity.

While the bereaved grandmother — having thoroughly disrupted the entire inn — was being consoled and offered wine in the main room, Lythande stopped the man, who was readying himself for departure, and made a dreadful wry face at the old woman's lamentations echoing through the breakfasting room. "What, no breakfast then? Or has the death spoilt your appetite?"

"I have fed well," said the man. "What a cacophony! As a musician, you will join me in regretting it."

"What I regret," said Lythande fiercely — was the soul-stealer actually boasting of his deed — "is only the pure soul who has gone."

"Is it so?" asked the man lightly. "By now, I dare say, she regrets only her purity."

Lythande made an involuntary grimace, and the man, as if aware he had angered the magician, laughed a little. "You are shocked? But of course her death had nothing to do with me."

"Nor with me," said Lythande. "But I would see justice done."

"Why should I care for justice if it comes to that?"

"It is the obligation of every civilized being —" said Lythande, fastening her mage-robe about her throat.

"But I care not a fig for justice, as you call it," said the cripple, taking up his great travelling-cloak and preparing to leave the room.

"Then, since you have no interest in the girl, for life or death," said Lythande, "you will, of course, have no objection to calling down divine retribution on her killer?"

"Oh, no, no," he said, and as he prepared to leave the room, discovered that Lythande was standing directly in his way so he could not pass.

"As will I," said Lythande, "since I have no other way to prove I did not slay her by my magic. So I swear willingly: may the footsteps of divine retribution follow me forever, waking and sleeping, if I had art, part, or knowledge of the death of this innocent soul. Now swear you the same." She made a mystical gesture, and the crippled man flinched.

"How know you her soul was innocent?"

"That has nothing to do with her death," said Lythande. "That is between her and whatever God may make it his business. Do you then refuse — before these witnesses — to swear to innocence of her death?" She gestured at the other guests at the inn, who began to look very ugly indeed.

"I fear no soul, innocent or otherwise," said the man. "But I would have no chance against such footsteps, being a cripple?"

"Then you refuse?"

"I so swear," he muttered.

"That the footsteps of divine retribution may follow you forever till her death is avenged?"

White as death itself, he nodded. "I so swear," he growled at last. And Lythande stepped away and permitted him to leave the room

Yet Lythande believed he would somehow manage to repudiate his oath. Taking her mage-robe, she beheld him preparing to depart.

"You go?"

"I go. Or are you preparing to follow me like the footsteps of — what was it — retribution?"

"Do you then fear those footsteps? I would, if I were you."

"I fear no footsteps, divine or human. And by the same token, you may follow me to the end of the world, if you have nothing better to do, and much good may it do you."

"I will take my chances on that," commented Lythande, resolving at that moment that she would see the footsteps.

All that day the rain continued to fall, and when the night came, the dark man sought shelter, with Lythande at his very side, so that they were shown into the same chamber, for it was the only one vacant. Lythande, who had slept little the previous night, slept well, until she was wakened. It was full daylight, and her companion had cried out with alarm, for round and round the bed, in a ceaseless crossing and recrossing of steps, were footprints upon footprints.

"That poor girl," said Lythande. "Do you suppose they have buried her in the rain?"

"How the devil should I know — or care?" snarled the man, but Lythande noticed that as he took his walking sticks and dragged himself from the room, he turned aside to avoid treading on the prints.

Still the rain continued to fall, and as they travelled through it, Lythande noticed that the other kept turning his head to the rear, as if against some sound. He asked at last, "What is that sound?"

"What sound? I heard nothing," said Lythande truthfully. "What sort of sound is it? Footsteps, perhaps?"

"How should I know?" snarled the man with a curse, but Lythande noticed that he still kept turning his head to the rear, as if to listen.

That night, when Lythande and her involuntary companion were shown to their room, Lythande woke again to find the room all but filled; her companion stared at the muddy marks on the rug, murmuring in horror, "Footsteps..."

"...of retribution?" said Lythande curiously, but the man replied only with another curse.

"Mud," she said, "They must have buried her in the rain after all." He made no answer, but then she was not expecting any answer.

""Magician," he said, "Can you rid me of a haunting?"

"I can."

"Name your fee, and do so."

"I can," said Lythande. "What sort of haunting?"

The man gestured at the muddy footsteps and hung his head. "You know," he said.

"Swear, then, your innocence in the matter, and I will do so at once," she said; "I take no commission from a man under a curse. But if you can swear there is nothing upon your conscience, then —"

There was no answer; the man left the room, turning again aside so that his foot would not cross the now-caked mud. His face was drawn with horror. When Lythande came up with him in the courtyard, he said truculently, "I forbid you to follow me further, Lythande."

"How do you propose to prevent me? I have not heard yet that you own all the roads hereabout," she said. "I go where I will and if I choose to travel in the same direction as you —"

"Follow me then, since I cannot prevent you," he snarled, and went on his way. Lythande, travelling almost out of his sight, at the far range of his vision, saw that now and again he would turn and look backward; she did not think he was looking for her.

All the same she made certain to arrive at the inn with him at the end of the day, when the host led them to the top of the building, up flight after flight of stairs, again to the same chamber, one with two beds, one of which was against a window, looking out on a stone flagged court below. On this bed the other traveller, without so much as a gesture at asking Lythande which she preferred, flung his pack and turned to Lythande with his hand resting on his knife.

"You will stop following me," he said, "or I will kill you."

"I would not advise that," Lythande said in her mellow neutral voice. "That would not prevent me from following you, but then I could walk through walls, or float in at windows like that one — oh, do take care, the landlord should at least have put a railing there!"

"Damn you," he burst out.

"If that be ordained," said Lythande calmly, "I assure you I have adequately seen to my own damnation and have no need of yours. However, if I were dead, I could, as I say, follow you —"

He flung out of the room with a curse. That night the man sat late in the tavern portion of the inn, swallowing pot after pot of ale. Lythande, on the contrary, went to bed directly. She had finished singing, and slept the sleep of the proverbial just, being wakened near dawn by the entrance of her travelling companion, very drunk, stumbling in the dark. He lit the lamp and surveyed the unmarked carpet.

"You see?" he demanded, "There is nothing there."

"The night is not yet over," said Lythande. "Do take care you do not fall from the window."

With a savage snarl, he extinguished the lamp, went stumbling to his bed, and fell into a restless snoring sleep.

Lythande slept again, being wakened by a cry from the cripple, who was staring in horror at the footprints, this time encircling his bed round and round.

Seeing Lythande awake, he said contemptously, "Mud again; the footsteps of retribution are lacking in imagination."

"That is not mud," said Lythande, bending to pick up a crumbling fragment. "It's graveyard mould. What will be next, I wonder? Blood? Bone dust? Ectoplasm? Oh, take care —"

She was interrupted by a cry; the man staggered and fell headlong from the high window, with a shriek which was abruptly cut short. Lythande stepped to the window, looking down at the corpse below.

"I guess he didn't want to know what came next," she mused. "I never will understand mortals who have no curiosity."

Then she called for the innkeeper to tell him he had a corpse in his courtyard, and while she waited she noted that the footprints had vanished.

"Mud," she mused, fingering the fragment still in her hands. "I wonder what graveyard mould does look like?"

But of course there was no answer.❧

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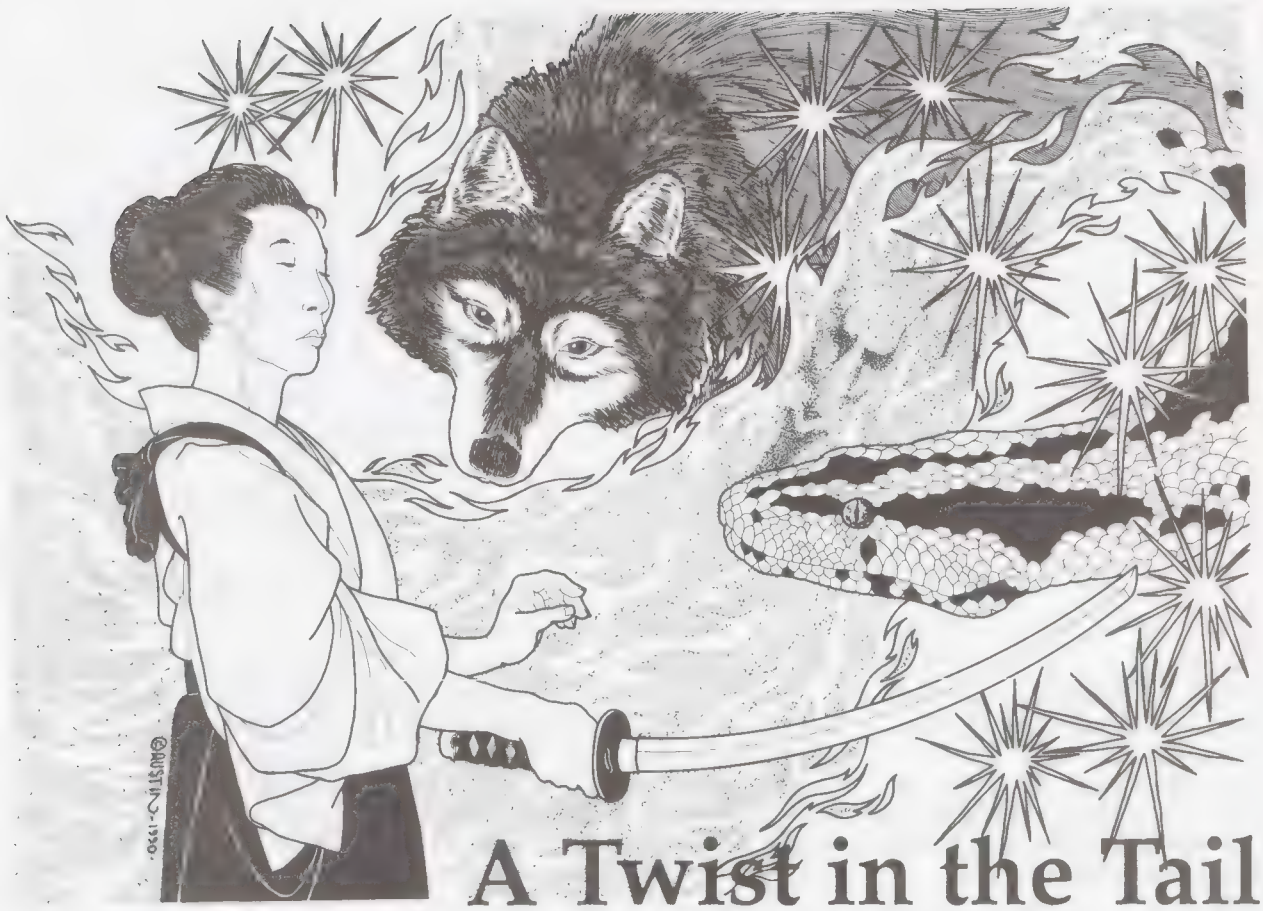


A Twist in the Tail

by Neely Stewart

The boy entered the chamber, padding lightly on bare feet. Even his brown, homespun tunic made no noise as he made his way toward the temple shrine.

Mi-lan sighed from her place in the shadows, her nap interrupted by a presence in the room. It was her duty to guard the shadow stone, so she kept watch on visiting worshippers. This boy was no exception, and her eyes followed him from the darkness.

Mi-lan watched the boy closely, her eyes focusing in sudden attention. He had reached the shrine, and instead of kneeling as most patrons, his head swiveled from side to side and a skinny arm reached out to grab the stone. Mi-lan slipped quietly out of the shadows.

"Boy! I would not touch the stone; it contains powers that a thief such as you could not understand." Two almond shaped brown eyes met Mi-lan's feline blue ones.

"Child," said Mi-lan softly, "the stone will only bring death to those who do not know how to use it."

"But lady, I do know how to use it." Mi-lan's eyes narrowed.

"Do not touch the stone. If you do, I will be forced to stop you."

The shaggy brown head was thrown back and laughter echoed off the walls. With the sound still pounding Mi-lan's ears, the boy's face and body began to change. Like wax held over a candle flame, his body began to melt and form again into a fully grown man.

Shapechanger! Mi-lan growled deep in her throat. *Damn*! Her eyes rested coldly on the creature before her. He returned her stare with a wry smile. "I was under the impression that the priests here believe in peace. They have no guards."

"Even priests must protect what is theirs."

"No matter, you are merely an inconvenience. I want the stone and you stand in my way, a problem I will soon rectify."

He lunged at Mi-lan with razor sharp blades. All thoughts fled as she countered with her own swords. Blades clashed and scraped, and clashed and scraped again as the sound echoed tenfold. Mi-lan gained ground as she thrust and parried, forcing him backwards. As if sensing this, the shapechanger began to dodge around pillars and hide in the shadows. A blade flew out of the darkness towards her; Mi-lan ducked and rolled out of the way.

"Perhaps this will be of challenge to you, temple guard."

Mi-lan turned to find a large black wolf snarling and barking laughter. He leapt, his claws gouging deep runnels in the stone floor. Mi-lan twisted, turning her shoulder so the wolf overleapt. The blow reeled Mi-lan backwards, her blades clattering to the floor. Mi-lan swore under her breath, her hand grasping at the dagger on her belt.

"Such a pity that this little game of ours must end so soon, temple guard. You have provided me with entertainment. I never liked to have things handed to me and without you this foray of mine would have been all too easy. Alas, it is time for a more direct approach." The voice altered to a painful hiss. Where the wolf had been now lay a small green snake. The serpent's black eyes glittered and its mouth opened to show fangs dripping poison. *Yes*, Mi-lan thought, *it is time for a more direct approach.*

A priest walked into the temple chamber and stopped in front of a pillow on the floor before the shrine. "Mi-lan, little mosquito, did you have a quiet evening while we were away?" The priest's hand stroked her soft fur. Blue eyes closed to slits in a dark mask. A rough, pink tongue caressed the priest's skin.

"Are you hungry, little one, or were you content to feast on the smaller creatures that invaded the temple tonight?" Mi-lan purred a long and contented purr, her dark tail thumping softly on the temple floor. ❧

Rebirth

by Pete D. Manison

Art by Janet Kramer

"I tell you I won't!"

Qllic lifted her chin defiantly at her parents, who hovered on silver wings just above her head.

"Darling, you know we love you and only want what's good for you." That was Tnaya, her mother. "All we ask is that you give us the chance to help."

Qllic rotated away, turning her shell on her mother in a deliberate gesture of disobedience.

"What's gotten into you, Child?" That was Gnizama, her father. "This is unheard-of. You don't know what you're saying. At your age, to question the wisdom of—"

"You Wingers are all alike!" Qllic snapped. The insult had the desired effect: both mother and father fluttered back a few wingspans from her, and, more importantly, they became, if only for a moment, silent.

Qllic pouted. Why was everyone so concerned with her well-being all of the sudden? Only rarely did the Wingers come down from their cloud-homes to visit their ground-locked children, and her parents were no different. Which was just fine wityh Qllic. She didn't need them. She didn't particularly want them around.

"By the wings of the First-born," Gnizama finally breathed, breaking the all-too-brief silence. "It's impossible to reason with you. Sometimes I think we shouldn't have allowed you to wait so long before—"

"Gnizama," Tnaya said, interrupting with her soft voice. "Please. Let me." She stroked her wings a half-beat, turning to look down on Qllic. "Baby, I understand what you must feel. This is always a frightening time. But it's *your* time. All your friends, all your younger brothers and sisters, have gone. Don't you want to be with them again? Isn't that better than going on . . . alone?"

Qllic's many legs trembled beneath her, but she refused to let the welling of emotion she felt change her mind. "No," she said, trying to sound more certain than she felt. "I will not Change. You can't make me!" She turned away, and after that she absolutely refused to say anything at all.

The blue forest mists unfolded before her as Qllic moved by moonsglow among the scraggly trees and thorn-studded bushes. They scratched at her shell in desperate futility, almost as if they had minds of her own—minds that had joined in the conspiracy against her and wanted only to block her path.

Head down in determination, she pressed onward into the night.

Force her to Change, would they? She'd see about that. She'd burrow so deeply into the forest that no Winger would dare to follow. She'd leave the world and everything behind if that was what it took to keep the one thing she valued most—her identity.

I'll never become one of them, she vowed. *What's so wrong with me as I am that I should want to Change? Why, nothing. Nothing at all.*

She came out into a clearing, and it was there that she encountered the stranger.

She slowed to a crawl, but she continued forward. The mists thinned as she drew nearer the figure. It was a Winger. Qllic shuddered. So they had followed her after all! Wasn't that just like a Winger? Well, she'd show this one that she wouldn't be—

The figure turned.

Qllic froze.

This was no ordinary Winger. He was different from anyone she had ever met. Oh, he had the same silver wings, the same light, translucent body, the same big, dark eyes. But in the center of his forehead was a teardrop-shaped amber crystal that glowed with a soft, steady light.

"Who . . ." she started.

"You are lost," he said. Something in his voice said that he knew her, that he had always known her.

"I know this forest," she said, barely hanging onto denial.

"You know the forest," he agreed. "Still, you are lost."

Something in his words, or maybe in his manner, caused her barriers to fall away.

"Yes," she said quietly.

"Tell me what troubles you."

She had never felt so uninhibited in the presence of a stranger. Perhaps it was because this was not a stranger, not really. And once she got started, she could not stem the flow of words that gushed from her mouth.

". . . but I don't care what they say. They only want what they want. They don't care about me. They don't even know me. If they did, they'd know I'm perfectly happy as I am, thank you, and the last thing I want in this world is to become like all the other—"

"Wingers?" he asked gently.

"Well," she said, blushing, "yes."

"Is that how you think of us? How you

think of me?"

She felt oddly guilty, as though she had hurt a friend, a very dear friend, someone she had known as long as life itself. "No," she stammered. "I didn't mean you. You're different."

"And the others?"

"Why do they want us to be like them, anyway? There's nothing wrong with living as the young do. Life is simpler on the ground, easier to understand. We may not have the clouds, but we know who—and what—we are."

His eyes glittered as if with secret knowledge. "Yes," he said, distance in his voice, "I remember how it was before. Nothing ever changed. It was simpler, but there was no meaning to life then. Believe me, little one, this way is better. We need the Change. The Change brings light. Before, all was darkness."

Qllic looked up at him, confusion clouding her thoughts. "You remember that? But only the First-born could . . ."

He smiled.

Qllic felt a chill, as if a cold draft had somehow gotten inside her shell and was blowing deep into the core of her being. "Are you the First-born?" she whispered.

His eyes were sad in a careworn face. "Call me Btan-Btan," he said simply.

"But are you —"

"Every family had its First-born, as does yours. Who is the eldest of your mother's children?"

"I am."

"Yet you have not Changed?"

"No. The others have all gone before me."

"Why have you waited?"

"I . . ." Qllic frowned. Her purpose, so clear in her mind a few short minutes ago, was fading from her memory.

"It's that you fear losing your Self, isn't it? That you fear being just like all Wingers, who are outwardly identical.

"Yes," she said, remembering.

He held out a thin, delicate hand. Between the two fingers was a glowing amber crystal like the one in his forehead. "Take this," he said.

She took the stone, cradling it in her forward pincers, and gazed at it in awe.

"Hold the crystal to you when you're in the cocoon. It will become a part of you. You will not be as any other."

She lifted her gaze from the glowing stone, but where the stranger had stood there was nothing but the curling blue forest mist.

"I'm so glad you came back."

Tnaya hovered above her, making last-minute preparations. Gnizama was a little above and behind Tnaya. He looked pleased but a little nervous.

"This is such a happy time," cooed Tnaya. Qllic couldn't help smiling.

The birthpad was an elevated structure of concentric rings that had stood for centuries. Qllic could feel the history beneath her many feet as she stood passively enduring her mother's ministrations. The rituals had become less stringent over time, but this had not lessened the age-old feelings the place engendered. Qllic felt keenly the pressure of the many lives that had ended . . . and begun . . . here.

"Said the First-born: 'Drink of my tears and be reborn in my image.'" Gnizama gave the quotation wings to let it hang in the air beside them.

Tnaya smiled. "My dear baby. Soon you'll be as we are. And you'll live with us at last among the clouds."

Reluctance crept up on Qllic time and again, but always she recalled the stranger Btan-Btan, his reassuring smile, and the gift he had given her. Always the reluctance dissolved.

"I'm ready," she heard herself say.

Tnaya was still hovering above her. Qllic watched as her mother bowed her head forward. After only a moment, the tears began to drip down from the hovering face. Qllic opened her mouth to let a single teardrop, burning, onto her tongue.

The world went hazy. The catalyst was beginning its work. Qllic held the amber crystal tightly to her breast, and she relaxed her hold on life as the dream began.

Life in the cocoon was a strange sort of not-quite-life that passed without time. Qllic felt that even her thoughts had slowed so that they never quite formed or if they did it was somewhere far away and she was only vaguely aware of them. She could not move, but, surprisingly, she felt no pain as her body pulsed with Change.

All she felt was warmth.

And her hand gripping the crystal.

Tightly.

Images floated through her mind, images not even as well defined as dreams, like isolated islands of concept:

--The face of Btan-Btan

--Hoping she would see him again

--Was he the First-born?

--The crystal glowing still in her tight little hand

--Who changed by will alone without the tear-catalyst

--Rain distantly thrumming on the outside of the cocoon

And all the while the images floated, sweet music played in her mind: the Song of Change her mother had sung to her so often when she was very small.

I sing of the Change
That comes to us all.
I sing of the Rise
That follows the Fall.
I sing of the First
Who gave us his tears
To bring us new life
And wings over fear.

The music filled her head, its rhythm merging with the soothing rain and the beating of many new hearts.

One morning, Qllic began to move tentatively within the confining walls of the cocoon. She wasn't sure why she should feel the urge to move at just that moment; it seemed the proper time.

She pushed hard against the wall of the cocoon. Light flashed in along tiny cracks radiating fro the pressure point. She pushed again, harder.

A large chunk of the cocoon fell away, and Qllic was bathed in the stunning light of a new day. When the rest of the cocoon began to fall away from her, she took her first awkward steps out onto the birthpad.

The air was cold on her moist body. The birthpad was deserted save herself. She looked out on a world that had been reborn. Colors blazed before her—colors so rick she wanted to scream in joyous terror. The world was alive: vibrating green plants; deep cinnamon earth; billowing white clouds across the blue-green sky.

She looked down.

This sleek, translucent body, was that her? Somehow it was beautiful to her now, much more beautiful than the memory of the thing she had been before. And there was the crystal, spreading its amber glow through her body from the spot in the center of her chest where it had fused with her.

I'm not like all the others, she thought. *I'm different.* She touched the crystal. She *was* different, but she knew now that it wasn't this that set her apart.

I'm still me, she thought, and she lifted from the birthpad on wings of silver, heading toward the clouds and her new skyward home. ❧

CONTRIBUTORS

George Barr
Bronthарn
Cover Artist

Even before I sold a cover painting to FANTASTIC STORIES about 30#*@!!-some - odd years ago, I'd decided that the field of science fiction and fantasy was where I wanted to spend my life.

So far, it's been a ball.

Though I'd always enjoyed writing, I assumed my participation in the genre would be as an illustrator. I painted for the public; I wrote for myself. I'm unsure now whether painting a good cover is a way to sell a story, or writing a good story is a way to sell a cover. Whichever, I'm glad that some of the tales which have filled my head all of these years are finally finding an audience.

It's my hope that–providing myself with a few stories –I'll be able to find someone willing to take one of the novels seriously. Hell, I'd even be willing to illustrate it.

Go George! I think John Betancourt is in the book business these days, check with him. And, your stories stand on their own, period. - jlb

David L. Burkhead
Jilka and the Evil Wizard

I am a writer currently living in Akron, Ohio.

I am a member of the Society for Creative Anachronism which is the source of much of my medieval lore. I am also close friends with several practicing pagans which is the source of much of my information on alternatives to the Judeo-Christian traditions.

I have sold to *Analog Science Fiction Fact* and to *High Technology Careers*. I have recently completed my first book, a juvenile science fiction novel. Works in progress include several shorter works and a fantasy novel.

The check for this story will just about cover the cost of Affiliate membership in the SFWA. My next sale, my third, should then allow me to proceed to active membership. P.S. I am dyslexic.

Tanya Huff
Be it Ever so Humble

I live in a small apartment in downtown Toronto (between the University and Chinatown) with two large cats, one small neurotic one, and an electrician. I work a full forty hour week at BAKKA, a science fiction bookstore, and still manage to write a book every nine months.

I don't like telephones, store-bought muffins, or the concept of social drinking. I do like baseball, sleeping at least eight hours a night, and snow. Although I haven't lived on the East Coast since I was three, I consider myself a Maritimer.

Three other Magdelene stories have appeared in *Amazing*. I have four novels out from DAW– *Child of the Grove, The Last Wizard, Gate of Darkness Circle of Light*, and *The Fire's Stone*– and a fifth, *Blood Price*, coming in May. (I'm contracted for another two books in this series.)

Someday, I'd like to be able to write full-time but then, wouldn't we all!

Phyllis Ann Karr
The Robber Girl, the Sea Witch and the Little Mermaid's Voice

Since my marriage June 2, 1990, to Clifton A. Hoyt, I have been operating professionally from three different "office workplaces". One of which is the house Clif is building for us; which is not yet in condition to accommodate a word processor, or even a kitchen range.

Marrying the right person has been one of the wisest decisions either of us ever made, and the last months have proved some of the happiest of my life. Otherwise, my biography has not changed since last time. My chief major literary project in the works is a radical departure: a collaborative graphic novel.

Lyn McConchie
The Sar Shan Kelpie

A New Zealander, Lyn had the experience I have heard so often: "It comes a time when you read several pieces of trash and look up and say, 'I could do better that that!'" I found her story a real gift. She's a voracious reader with a personal library of over 4,000 books. She discovered fandom in 1981 and will be attending WesterCon this summer in British Columbia – look for her ! – *jlb*

Pete D. Manison
Rebirth

I am a thirty-year-old native Houstonian and support my science fiction and fantasy addiction by driving a truck full time for a local company. My hobbies include weight lifting, running, and reading a wide variety of both fiction and nonfiction. I'm also heavily into rock: climbing, collecting, and music. I attended the University of Houston for three years. One day, hopefully, I'll return for a degree in electrical engineering.

"Rebirth" is my fourth sale. My work has appeared, or will soon appear, in Writers of the Future, Vol. 6, *NOT YET*, and *Beyond . . . Science Fiction and Fantasy*.

As for "Rebirth", it owes its existence to Joseph Campbell, whose work illuminates the heart of fantasy.

Neely Stewart
A Twist in the Tail

I was born in a U.S. Air Force Base hospital in Tachikawa, Japan, located just outside Tokyo. When I was six, I lived in Germany and was fortunate enough to have visited many of the neighboring countries. I am 19 and currently live in Texas with my parents, my dog, and my aging Great Aunt. I am a sophomore in college studying for a Bachelor of Fine Arts.

This is my first professional sale. I enjoy spending time with my family, reading, writing, and drawing. I also enjoy walking in the park and visiting the Dallas Birds of Prey Rehabilitation Center. I do volunteer work at a museum and sanctuary where I give trail tours and lectures. I enjoy dressing up and attending the annual opening of Scarborough Faire set in medieval England.

A.Orr
The Lady Greensleeves

My parents taught me from a very early age to believe in fairies and all things strange and wonderful. I still hold those beliefs and am convinced they have been a great help to me in writing fantasy.

I began writing short stories and poems almost as soon as I learned my letters (my mother still has them), made my first story sale at age 18 to a now-defunct SF magazine which paid me $8.60. The story was never published, which is just as well. There were a few more story sales, a long and ponderous novel on Atlantis, which is still sitting around somewhere. While I was working on it, I conceived my first published novel in about five seconds flat, and wrote it in three weeks. Nothing will ever be that easy again. I was fortunate enough to find a very good agent who sold the ms. right off the bat, and the second in the *Amber* series, *In The Ice King's Palace*, followed by about two years.

I am currently the typesetter and art department 'floater' for an ad agency. I married in July of 1990 and we live in an old farmhouse in the middle of 25 acres of fields, with five cats and a golden retriever. Things are nice here, and I swear there is a fairy ring in the front yard.

Darrell Schweitzer
Men Without Maps

I am now sole editor of *Weird Tales*, and so have succeeded to the throne of Farnsworth Wright. I am also on my way to becoming a famous Italian author. *(Darrell, always modest! –jlb)* My ***The Shattered Goddess*** was published in Italy last summer, and must have done well, because the publishers are showing interest in more. This is my first mass-market paperback in any language. (My second will probably be ***We Are All Legends*** in German.)

I've had a couple of good short-story publications of late, notably in the March 1991 ***Amazing***.

I am presently working on my third "real" novel – not counting two hack jobs which never got published anyway – to be called ***To Become a Sorcerer***.

Micole Sudberg
The Swans Are Mute

I'm a junior at Hunter College High School in New York City, and basically am interested in reading, writing, listening to music, and am currently obsessed with Kenneth Brannagh's version of Henry V.

I'd like to thank Regina Robbins and Isabel Cole for their criticism of the story.

Laura Underwood
Harper's Moon

In addition to having published short fiction in *Sword & Sorceress V* and *Appalachian Heritage*, I have published numerous non-fiction articles, and science fiction and fantasy reviews for the *Knoxville News-Sentinel*. I am waiting to hear from the publisher who has my fantasy novel under consideration.

My personal interests range from fencing (I was state women's champion four of the last five years and I am the senior coach for the U.T. Fencing Club), weight lifting, hiking and biking in the Smokies, to classical and New Age music, art, history.... In my mundane existence, I gave up my job as a stable bum to work as a librarian with the Knox County Library System for the past 17 years where I am now Head of Periodicals. I live in one small room of my family's house in Knoxville, Tennessee, along with the encroaching accumulation of 36 years and a cairn terrier named Rowdy Lass.

Jason Van Hollander
Men Without Maps

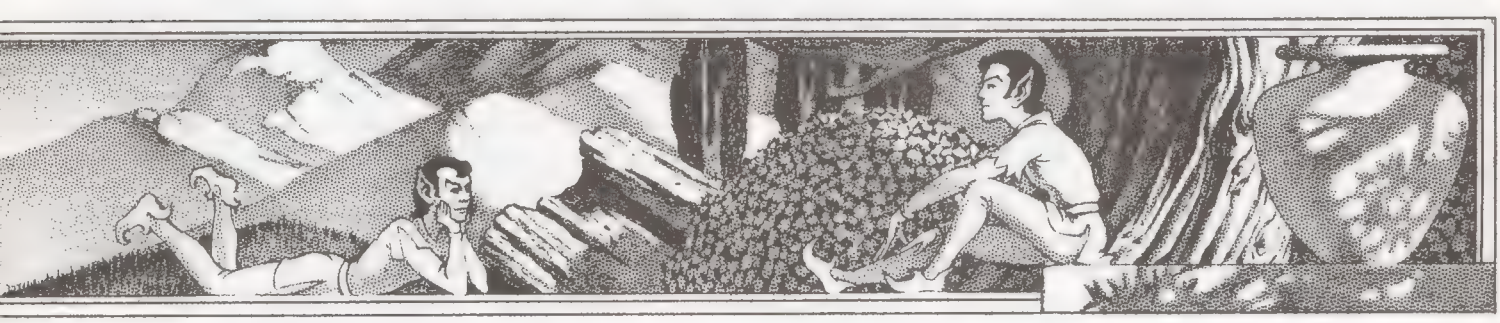
Jason joins us again, this time in collaboration with Darrell Schweitzer. You may recall his story *"Book of Souls"* was the cover story which inspired Kelly and Laura Freas's Chesley-award-winning cover – Fall 1989 (Vol. 2 Issue 2; whole issue #6).

Jason is still residing in Merion, Pennsylvania, and is working in a design studio in a new role as manager of an art department. He quips that he realizes he's finally become a bureaucrat after all these years. "Now I get to tell people what to do instead of people telling me what to do!"

A Last-Minute Editorial:

Another Subject I Wish Had Never Come Up

One of the things I say– repeatedly– in my guidelines, is that I do not even read simultaneous submissions. I know this may not seem fair to some people, but it's pure self-protection. Not once but twice in this issue we've had to pull a story out of the line-up (once at blue-line) and substitute something else. It is very unfair and unprofessional behavior from an author. Editors can't do this at the last minute. Take note, **everybody**: if you do this to us again you will find your manuscript *persona non grata*. I'll never, never read anything you submit again. **– MZB**



The Sar Shan Kelpie

By Lyn Mc Conchie

I lay in the long grass, silent, unmoving, watching the Kelpie play in the waters of Sar Shan Lake, his strong hooves pawing up the water and spraying it in crystal rainbows over his back and flanks. I chuckled quietly. My mother said that the Kelpie was a creature of darkness, full of trickery and cruel as the mountains, but at the moment he looked like any other black horse playing in the sun.

Sometimes I had been able to creep closer, those rare times that the spells my mother taught me worked. A pity, mother always said, that I had so small a portion of the gift. She had lowered herself to bed with my father in the hope of a daughter with full power; instead she had me. All my life I had understood that I was a disappointment to her. Healing came easy to me but the greater spells seemed to twist into nothing.

Still she loved me I was certain – had I not been fed well, and clothed as befitted the daughter of a Sorceress? She had even allowed me to work with Sanja the healer. Even more, she herself had taught me for several years until it was plain that my gifts were small, and not cast me out for my failure.

Indeed I loved her. She was beautiful, tall and supple, with long black hair and the walk of a Queen. Our servants always leapt to do her bidding. The villagers outside the towers shrank before her, but I understood about that. They feared sorcery, and those who wielded the power.

Once I had asked, if this was so, why they did not fear Sanja? My mother's scornful laughter had haunted me for days. How stupid I had been to ask. Sanja had none of the Great Powers; she could not call the lightning, walk invisible among her foes, or dance as a wolf with the wolves. She was only a healer.

Below me the Kelpie still frolicked in the lake. He too was beautiful, the perfect copy of the perfect horse, only the red pupils of his eyes betrayed him as foe. When my spells worked, I had stood at the edge of his lake admiring him. Sometimes I had wondered if he could see me but it was not possible. Mother told me he destroyed all who trespassed.

I must go back to the Towers. Mother always expected me to be present at the evening meal when she was home; I disappointed her in so many ways I should not fail in the small things that I could control.

I scrambled up and waved goodbye to the Kelpie, only polite after I had spent half the afternoon watching him, and headed for the road. I caught a lift with the firewood cart and arrived in time to dress and tidy my hair. Mother always said that even if I couldn't look like her, I could at least be clean.

Actually I needn't have bothered. As I entered the banqueting room a message arrived for me. Mother would be away

for several months: she had found another clue to the *Lost Spells* (eternal life, or youth, or something) and would be spending part of the summer in pursuit of it. I read the message out to everyone and went on with the meal. The Towers run like clockwork anyway; Mother has the servants trained and when she isn't home they just continue with the work. There's more noise, of course; Mother doesn't like them talking or singing when she's home. It disturbs the concentration needed for spell casting.

Next morning I decided to try the invisibility spell again. It was beautifully sunny. The Kelpie would be out grazing and if I got to the lake edge before he appeared I could use the minimum spell and not have to hold it while I walked.

I was up at first light. The servants were busy so I just sneaked out to Sanja's cottage. Sanja was about to start breakfast when I arrived, and she added another loaf to the table and waved me to the guest chair. She's a very quiet person, she reminds me of a little brown rabbit, although she can be fierce if her craft is involved – I'll never forget how she spoke to Bryon the baker over getting his wife up too soon after her last baby.

She didn't ask where I was going, so I told her anyway. I wonder about Sanja, I really do. I explained that it was quite safe because of the spell. She asked what I thought would happen without it? I told her what Mother said about the Kelpie being tricky and cruel. And then Sanja said that a mirror can be cruel.

I'd been waiting for the Kelpie for nearly an hour before I finally figured out what she must have meant. I guess she's right. Every time I look into a mirror I'm sad I don't look like Mother.

After a couple of hours I was sure the Kelpie wasn't going to come out of the lake today. I was just about to get up when the water began to swirl and there he was.

I settled down again to watch him and daydream a bit (sometimes I dream I look just like Mother but with more power and I rescue her from danger, then she says that she knows I am truly her daughter and puts her arms around me).

At that point I usually have to laugh,which brings me back to earth. I can't set a decent ward spell, and I look like a fox with my red hair and freckles. And as for Mother hugging me, Mother doesn't like to be touched; she says it sickens her. I wonder how she managed with my father?

I never knew my father. Mother says he had some power and that's why she chose him. She said once, when she was angry, that I looked just like him, too, and was just as soft. That was when I couldn't kill a chicken to paint her spell in blood. I just threw up and ran.

It was after that she let me spend more time with Sanja and I found I could do healing. When Sanja saw I was interested, she taught me more and now I'm nearly as good as her. I know it isn't the Great Power but it's nice to be able to do something right.

I'd just gotten into an exciting bit of my dream again when there was an odd feeling on the back of my neck. I looked around and there was the Kelpie. I felt in my mind for the spell and did it again but he kept standing there with that amused "I can see you" look, and all I could do was sit there and look back. Just as I was feeling that one more minute of this and I'd have hysterics, he turned and strolled off.

I sat there for a bit, but when he'd moved further away I started to edge away in a crouch until I was part way up the bank and then got all the way up and fled, although my knees felt like bread dough. All I could think of on the way home was, "Why hadn't he killed me?" and, "I'll never be able to go to the lake again!"

I didn't tell anybody about it, and for the next week I moped around the place. After that I started to think maybe the spell hadn't stopped him seeing me, but I hadn't been hurt either. On the other hand maybe it was a trick to lure me back. I ran into a wall there. What could he do to me he couldn't have done the first time? Sanja says I'm as curious as a cat. I just hope I have nine lives because tomorrow I'm going back to the lake.

I was early again. The Kelpie wasn't in sight so I spent some time working on the spell until I was positive it was right this time, then I dozed off in the sun. When I woke up the Kelpie was back. I sat up cautiously and he looked at me and went back to grazing. I think I can forget that spell – either I'm doing it wrong or it doesn't work on Kelpies. On the other hand I'm unmurdered. So close, the Kelpie was even more beautiful than I had thought. He wasn't a black, really; in the sunlight close up he had sort of patterns like oil in water when he moved.

I sat there all afternoon and just watched him. He didn't seem to mind. After a few hours he moved further round the lake and I climbed to my feet and headed for home. I stopped at the top of the bank and waved to him, and he lifted his head and looked back—it felt like he was saying goodbye too.

I don't know if I should tell Sanja or not. She won't ask anything but if I told her she might know why the Kelpie hasn't done anything to me.

Summer has just finished and Mother is back. We weren't expecting her and I was down at the lake when she found me. She threw a "stay put" spell at the Kelpie and he did. I wonder why her spells work on him when mine don't?

Then the news. It's awful: the spell Mother had been searching for needs Kelpie blood to finish it properly. Mother has the silver knife in her hand, and she's going to kill the Kelpie while her spell holds him.

She reaches him, and it's like a lightning strike but you can't see it, just that ringing feeling. Suddenly the Kelpie turns his head. Mother's spell isn't working. He meets her eyes, then mine.

I feel something shatter inside me, as I face the truth for the first time. Cold and cruel and selfish, she's never loved me. If it were *my* blood she'd needed for that damn spell, then she'd have taken it without a pause.

I turn and walk away. At the top of the bank I look back. Mother is still standing there, and the Kelpie is wading into his lake. I don't know what she saw but it seems to have stunned her. If I get my travel pack and go now, she won't stop me.

When I reach the village Sanja is waiting with both our packs. She always knows things. We will find a village a long way away where two good healers can earn a living. Mother can have her power – the Great Powers always seem to be destructive, spectacular but destructive. I'd rather be a healer.

When we started off down the road I ask Sanja why Mother always said the Kelpie was dangerous. It's easy once you think about it, she says. Kelpies show the truth, and a mirror is cruel.

Not for me. The Kelpie showed me what I am, and I'm going to be the healer I can be. That was the choice the Kelpie showed me. ❧

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Harper's Moon

By Laura J. Underwood

nwyn Baldomyre opened his eyes when he heard the gentle thrum of the strings pulsating in his ears. He glanced across the campsite. Moonlight reflected off the white wood of the harp leaning against the fallen tree. Golden strings shimmered in the soft glow of the pale, milky pools. The unicorn head carved above the neck was turned as though gazing at something afar.

With a sigh, Anwyn pushed himself off the ground, tugging his woolen blanket tight about his slender shoulders. The fire was a little more than red embers glowing in the dark of Bracken Wood. The moon was full; its light offered fair illumination. The youth brushed copper locks from his sleepy silver eyes and squinted in the direction of Glynnanis' gaze. His movement caught the harp's attention, and Glynnanis turned its head to stare at the minstrel still wrapped in his sleeping blanket. The sapphire gems of the unicorn's eyes glittered in the moonlight as they captured Anwyn's argent stare. He shivered and felt the hum of power he had come to accept from the harp.

"Glynnanis," he whispered. "Is something the matter?"

The harp's voice was sweet, a melodic sound in Anwyn's mind. "*We are not alone.*"

Anwyn pushed back his blanket and groped for his dagger. Little good it would do him if the intruder were a ruthless brigand. He feared their sort more than any magical foe. "How many?" Anwyn asked. "How far?"

"*You'd know if you were a mage.*" Anwyn flinched at the reproachful words. The harp seemed to enjoy needling Anwyn for wasting his mageborn talents. "*Only one, and quite close.*"

Anwyn peered at the soft indigo of night. He could see nothing in the woods. Invisible? That thought was enough to tighten a coil of fear in his chest. His own father once warned Anwyn he should never stay the night in Bracken Wood, a place of old magic about which many tales were told. Anwyn tried to pass those stories off as tales meant to frighten an inquisitive child who was the youngest son, and near youngest sibling of ten. He should have tried to reach the village he knew was beyond the next ridge, but night had fallen so much sooner than he expected, and he was so weary from travel.

"Where is it?" Anwyn said, trying to steady the quiver in his tenor. Glynnanis looked amused.

"*Close,*" the harp said in reassuring tones. "*Be still and it will come.*"

Anwyn nodded. His mind was already calling up the strains of an arcane song that would give him the power to flee elsewhere in the blink of an eye.

Glynnanis began to play a melody, soft at first, a lilting piece Anwyn had composed. The harp loved this song that Anwyn had written for Rhystar's pleasure. Thinking of the elderly mage, Anwyn wished he were in Rhystar's faraway hold at that very moment. The mage had taught Anwyn the songs of sorcery and had given him the harp Glynnanis when his own was destroyed. The magus taught Anwyn other things as well, mostly about himself and his feelings.

The melody grew louder and faster. Anwyn continued to watch the trees beyond, wondering why the harp was making so much noise, when he caught a movement at the base of a tree. Very close, indeed! Anwyn realized too late that the shadow itself was alive, and no more than two arms lengths from his feet. He grabbed his dagger, bringing it up flashing in the moonlight, knowing his skills as a fighter were useless no matter how hard friend and father tried to teach him a means of defending himself. Anwyn would rather flee from a fight than face it.

Something darted back, stumbling into the light. Anwyn froze. It was a man—or was it? So small, no taller than a toddling child. No, it was a perfectly formed man, for the fellow had a beard dangling to the belt encircling his tiny waist. Were Anwyn standing, the man's head would have just topped the minstrel's knee. Black eyes grew wide on a face masked by animal fear. The little man scrambled for balance and turned to flee.

"No, wait!" Anwyn called, dropping his dagger and crawling onto his knees. "Don't run! I won't hurt you! I swear!"

The little man paused, looking back over one shoulder. His face was etched with deep lines. Anwyn was willing to swear the fellow's features were carved from gnarled oak.

"Speak ye the truth?" the little man said, arching one bushy brow. His comical face resembled an old grey fox studying a fat lazy hen.

Anwyn nodded, meeting the dark squint. Slowly, the little man turned full facing the minstrel and nodded. "Ye speak the truth," he said. "Ye canna lie, can ye, silver eyes?"

With a sigh, Anwyn relaxed. He'd grown up hearing those very words from family and friends. His silver eyes made it impossible for him to darken any truth with a lie. They also marked him as mageborn. "Who are you, sir?" he asked.

"I am Dorbyn Fiercewind," the little man said. "I came to see who was playing such beautiful music this evening."

Anwyn smiled. "I'm glad you liked it."

"Not so much I am the one liking it, lad," Dorbyn said with a nod. "It be Sharlyn Moonmistress what heard yer harp from afar."

"Sharlyn Moonmistress? Who is she?"

Dorbyn bowed his head, dark eyes twinkling. "Mistress of Bracken Wood, Queen of the Dance."

Anwyn shivered. Where had he heard stories about the Queen of the Dance before? Wee folk who cavorted under the full moon and dragged travelers into their revels. His own father who was gamekeeper to High Lord Syndovan of Nymbaria where Anwyn was born might have been the source. Children of the moon, his father once said, dark folk able to change into animals at will. Thynwold Baldomyre told his youngest son many such tales, and Anwyn recalled loving them all, even those that frightened him. He recalled Rhystar once saying only a fool would linger in Bracken Wood when the moon was full. *Am I that fool?* A disturbing thought.

"Her royal highness hopes ye will attend our revels this eve, for this is the

Harper's Moon

night of the Harper's Moon, and we need a good harper to play for the Dance," Dorbyn said. "Are ye interested, young lad?"

"I don't know," Anwyn said, casting an uneasy glance at Glynnanis. The unicorn head was angled to watch the exchange, and he would have sworn the harp's expression carried a hint of amusement.

Dorbyn reared back, hands on hips. A grin split the little man's wood-grain face. "Are ye afraid, lad?"

Anwyn bit his tongue instead of blurting "yes." His own curiosity was aroused. The minstrel sat back on his heels, his harp offering no sage advice as it would have any other time. Was Glynnanis intrigued by this offer of a moonlight revel?

"How do I know this isn't a fairy prank?" Anwyn askd.

Dorbyn's grin actually widened. "Fine talk coming from a Thuathyn. The humans say her as fey as we, you who canna grow a beard and age so slowly. I'll tell ye this much, lad. Ye'll be safe so long as ye dinna enter the circle itself. Only those of mortal blood what cross the line become trapped. Do ye think ye can play all night, harper?"

"I can try," Anwyn said while wondering if Glynnanis would be willing to carry the tune should Anwyn's fingers grow weary.

"Then come with me," Dorbyn said. "Bring only yer harp."

"But my . . . ."

"Yer camp 'twill be safe, lad. By the by, what do they call ye? Sharlyn Moonmistress will want to know."

"Anwyn Baldomyre," Anwyn said and felt a tickle of dread between his shoulderblades. Rhystar once said there was power in knowing a name, so it should be given with care.

"Welcome to the Dance, Anwyn Baldomyre," Dorbyn said. "This way, please."

Dorbyn slipped back into the forest, becoming a part of the shadows. Anwyn was forced to snatch up Glynnanis and follow as best he could.

Once among the trees, every root and stump threatened to spill the minstrel. Branches slapped his face as he raced after Dorbyn. The little man entered a thick tangled copse so dark Anwyn could barely see his own hand in front of him. He clung to Glynnanis, fearing he would trip and break the precious harp. More than once, he lost his bearings, and the confusion only added to his unease. What if this were a trap? What if the wee folk were interested in stealing his harp? Rhystar would be angry if Anwyn lost Glynnanis. The mage created the harp as a gift for another lover long ago, one who died tragically. Rhystar was a long time recovering, blaming himself for poor Colyn's death. For centuries, he kept Glynnanis and the songs of sorcery in a secret place and mourned. Then Anwyn stumbled into the mage's peaceful life, an innocent most eager to learn and understand why his own desires lay in something other than a woman's love.

Anwyn was deep into these thoughts when the darkness fell away into a circle of firelight. An opening in the canopy of trees brought a powerful moonbeam down from above. He blinked against the brilliance, raising a hand to shade his eyes as he stumbled out of the shadows. He was surrounded by a cacophony of voices raised in idle banter and laughter. The air smelled of rich earth and strong ale. Anwyn glanced about at the writhing motion of so many bodies whirling and bobbing to some silent music. There must have been a hundred or more in the undulating mass.

His own entrance created quite a stir as men and women turned to face him. They were delicate folk with tiny features and bodies sinuous in proportion. Anwyn was a giant in their midst. To his surprise, they showed no fear, surrounding him, tugging at his cloak and trews, pushing and pulling as they urged him forward.

He saw the circle's edge, a ring of glittering stones on the dark loam. The revelers forced him towards it with giggles and squeals of delight. "No!" he cried, wrenching against their grasps.

"Stay your hands!" Dorbyn called. "He does not wish to cross!" Yet his foxy grin spoke of mischief and turned Anwyn's blood cold.

There were whines and titters of protest, but the pressure ceased to propel him towards the edge. Trembling, Anwyn sat down where he stood, still clutching Glynnanis to his chest and halfway wishing the harp was a shield. His dagger still lay where he had dropped it back at camp. Dorbyn motioned the revelers back, and a path appeared in their midst.

From the center of the circle stepped a female slightly taller than the rest. Her gossamer gown did little to disguise the delights of her body. Anwyn realized then many of the wee folk were clad in so little as to leave no room for modesty. A few darted about as naked as babies, undisturbed by his incredulous stares. Anwyn riveted his own gaze to the female's eyes. Those around him bowed.

"Welcome, stranger," she said. "Who art thou?"

Anwyn swallowed and inclined his head in a bow, not an easy pose while sitting on the ground. "Anwyn Baldomyre," he said, "minstrel to High Lord Syndovan of Nymbaria."

Her features lit up with delight. "So thou art the harper whose songs have graced our ears this night."

"Yes," he said.

"Then welcome, Harper Baldomyre," she said. "I am Sharlyn Moonmistress, Queen of the Dance. Thou hast come at a most opportune time. We are in need of a fine, handsome harper such as thyself this night."

"So I've been told," Anwyn said. Sharlyn's predatory gaze was enticing, as was her small body. Anwyn swallowed again, wishing he didn't find her so provocative. No woman had ever affected him this way before.

"Wilt thou play for us, harper?" she asked.

A log was rolled up behind Anwyn by several of the younger men. They were so strong for their size. He crawled backwards onto the proffered seat, never allowing his gaze to drift from Sharlyn Moonmistress. The Queen of the Dance offered a smile, and he could not help but mirror it. Slowly, he turned his harp into position, pressing the soundbox to his chest and resting his fingers on the golden strings. Glynnanis inclined its head to stare at the lovely queen. Her feral eyes reminded Anwyn of a wolverine about to seize some prey unawares. A hush fell over the crowd. Bright black eyes, like hungry ferrets, peered at him from all quarters. Anwyn took a deep breath to still the flutters in his stomach and stroked the harp strings.

At once, the revelers came to life, leaping and darting about the clearing, springing and twirling about Anwyn and the central fire. Flames leaped up, lighting the whole clearing with the brilliance of flickering sunshine. The motions made him giddy, so he closed his eyes, letting his fingers dance over the golden strings. His music swelled through the night and filled the air with a merry sound, bring-

ing comfort to his own unease. Voices joined him, laughing and singing to his jaunty tunes. He played without pausing from one melody to the next, and his fingers grew numb with exertion. Soon, he could not feel them at all. Still he played, every song he could remember pouring from him like water over a fall.

He opened his eyes to the firelight and saw the writhing shapes of men and women joined in dance, sensuous bodies entwined more closely than he thought possible. His wild music was arousing his own passions as much as their erotic twisting and turning. He closed his eyes again and thought of Rhystar's gentle hands. The ecstasy filled him so he forgot the world at large until he felt Glynnanis tossing its head like some wild creature. The harp's voice screamed in his mind. *"Anwyn, have care!"*

He opened his eyes, his fingers grasping the metal strings to silence. He was no longer sitting on the log, though he had not felt himself move. Beneath his feet glittered the circle of stones. Anwyn tottered on the edge, his head spinning as though he were part of the Dance. One foot was poised to cross the line, and beyond he saw the wild gleam in Sharlyn's beady eyes. Her arms swayed in sensuous motions, undulating snakes extending from her shoulders, beckoning him towards her.

When his music stopped, so did the Dance, and the revelers were suddenly on him like leeches, seizing his trews, his cape, his boots, a multitude of tiny hands forcing him precariously forward. Anwyn yelped and threw his weight back, falling among the wee folk. Chanting voices filled his ears.

"Harper, harper, cross the line
Join the Queen of the Dance divine.
Dance in the circle
where the full moon does shine.
The Queen must feast,
so cross the line!"

"No!" Anwyn cried, flailing with one arm while clinging to Glynnanis.

No use! They were crawling over him, small bodies scrambling and grabbing hold wherever they could, seizing Anwyn so he could not escape. *"The song!"* Glynnanis called to his mind. *"Use the song to step through the Gate!"*

Frantically, Anwyn searched his mind for the sorcerous song to open a rift in time that would allow him to pass to another place. He found it, humming the first few notes in his throat before opening his mouth to let the song free. As the melody passed his lips, the wee folk paused. Some fell back in wonder of this new enchanting sound.

"Stop him!" Sharlyn said. "The harper must be mine!"

Anwyn struggled as their hands clasped his clothes again. They were strong, these small creatures, and he felt himself being dragged towards the center. He put every ounce of his will behind the song. Blackness swept over him. Still clinging to Glynnanis, he thought of the campsite he left behind. The smothering dark covered him like a blanket. Then, cool air kissed his skin, and he was lying on the ground next to a circle of dying embers. From afar, a horrid shrieking filled the night. Anwyn felt tiny fingers clutching his clothes. He looked down and saw small hands severed at the wrists, still pinching his trews, cape and tunic.

With a howl of revulsion, he swept them away, watching them fall aside and change into the paws of small forest creatures. His frenzied throes shook Glynnanis, bouncing dissonant notes from the harp's strings. Scrambling away from the claws that littered the ground, Anwyn drew his knees to his chest, one arm wrapped around the harp's neck. His breath came in short gasps. Icy trickles of sweat chilled his flesh.

"We must go," Glynnanis whispered to his mind.

Anwyn raised his head. The screams that racked the night were getting louder and closer, no longer resembling voices. They sounded more like furies or rampaging animals howling after escaping prey.

The cold hand of fear reached down into his bowels. Clambering to his feet, Anwyn gathered his pack and blanket. He fled towards the road and the ridge, knowing he could not rest until he reached the village. To stop would be to die.

The sounds behind him increased as he crashed through stands of trees eager to stop his flight. Branches lashed him, snagging his clothes. The harp jangled from its rough journey. Anwyn's lungs screamed for air. This was not for him, fleeing through the dark of Bracken Wood like a thief who knew the hounds and hunters were close on his heels. *Oh, Rhystar, you have loved a fool indeed!* His heart pounded beneath his ribs, threatening to break free. He stumbled over roots and rocks, finally reaching the road, and still he heard them coming like a demonic horde, screaming for his blood. He could not use his song to escape this time, not until he had rested a full night. Rhystar warned Anwyn of this. The magical songs had Anwyn's limitations. Anwyn could only use them once a day. He was not willing to make the sacrifice that would allow him to use magic freely. There *were* other songs he could use, but for the moment, none of them seemed appropriate. Fire would destroy the woods. Wind and water might slow the horde, but there were so many, he could never get them all. He could open the earth to swallow them, but he would need to see where they stood, and the only heart in need of comfort at this moment was his own.

He continued to run after he reached the road. Moonlight flooded the world not canopied by trees. Anwyn paused only long enough to look back. His heart took to his throat. The shadows on the forest floor seemed alive with a multitude of animals. Fox, wolverine, badger, hare and ferret. Things that could be wolves or wildcats. Shapes from the stories his father told him, following as Anwyn stumbled along the road. His feet were unwieldy lumps of lead, catching every stone and bump. Fear and exertion weakened his limbs.

Something flitted out of the air, a bat or bird, flying at his head. Anwyn raised a hand to protect his face. Tiny talons gouged his flesh. He shrieked, lurching sideways, then barreled on with his cowl pulled over his lowered head.

"Stop him! Stop the harper!" Tiny voices echoed in the chirps of crickets and the calls of night birds. Anwyn whimpered in terror, pressing Glynnanis to his chest, yet knowing the harp could do nothing to save him from this fate. *Your fault!* he thought, anger momentarily giving rise to the temptation to toss Glynnanis to the horde and hopefully save himself. The harp trembled in his arms as though knowing it deserved his rage. It had done nothing to discourage him from following Dorbyn.

A huge snarling badger bolted across the road at Anwyn's feet, tripping him. The minstrel threw himself shoulder first to the ground, guilt driving him to protect his precious harp from being crushed. The fall jolted him. He bit his tongue, tasting the metallic flavor of blood, while rolling onto his back. Glynnanis' strings gave a loud twang. By the time Anwyn crawled to his knees, they had him surrounded, a circle of feral faces. Dark eyes

stared, no longer bright or amused. They wanted his flesh and blood for a feast to repay the debt of blood staining his clothes, the blood of those he maimed with his magic. He clutched the harp to him and shivered, glancing up at the Harper's Moon glowing overhead. Tears escaped him, released by the fear that iced his being.

"Play," a trembling voice whispered to his mind.

Glynnanis?

Blinking, Anwyn drew the harp to his chest and coaxed a gentle chord from the strings. If he had to die, let it be doing that which he loved the most, playing the music that always filled his soul. The first strains of his melody were barely audible. Anwyn forced them to grow and swell under the moon. The circle of dark furry bodies began to sway, slowly at first, soon matching the rhythmic throb of his harp. He let his fingers caress the strings as never before, timing his song with the rapid beating of his heart. Glynnanis bobbed its unicorn head in time with the music. Around Anwyn, the strange beasts rose onto hind legs unused to standing and began again the Dance. They swirled in a circle, ever close, ever far, entranced by the music that filled their ears. Black eyes grew merry, losing the lust for blood. Anwyn looked up at them only once, then lowered his head and played for all he was worth.

he tears chilled his cheeks with the kiss of a breeze, and still he played, never looking up, never stopping. His fingers ached until he thought they would break. The callouses tore from his flesh, letting warm blood flow down his hands. His gouged flesh stung against the metal. Anwyn refused to stop. He grew so weary he thought he would fall over, senses floating with the strains of his songs. His mind played tricks on him. In his thoughts, the images of his family and friends cavorted among the revelers, all dancing and swaying to his music, trapped by the sound. Faces swirled together as one, ever changing in the strange pale light.

His heart sang when a faint flow of orange spilled over the eastern horizon. The shadowy forms faded slowly, some slipping away, others merely disappearing. At last, there stood just one, a tiny figure draped in gossamer, looking wan in the morning light creeping across the sky. Sharlyn Moonmistress stepped close enough for Anwyn to feel her warm breath and smell the musky animal scent. Her dark eyes bore a sparkle of mischief as she met his bleary, silver gaze.

"This time, Anwyn Baldomyre, sweet harper, thou hast escaped," she said. "Do not think thou wilt elude me easily if thou should pass through Bracken Wood again. I shall be waiting for thee when the Harper's Moon rises once more."

She turned into mist before his eyes, her shape folding into a white owl rising on the morning wind and disappearing into the trees. For a moment, Anwyn stared at the space she had occupied, quivering with excitement and wonder. He drew Glynnanis to his chest, cradling the harp in arms weakened by exhaustion. His fingers burned from the lacerations. Gingerly, he rubbed them against his palms and turned a wet gaze towards the fading moon.

"It will be a long wait, Sharlyn Moonmistress," he whispered as he vowed never to pass through Bracken Wood again. ❧

RESULTS from the CAULDRON

As a rule, we recognize only the top three stories in each issue. But since we received so many letters from readers who wanted to know at least the top ten in the Short-Short Issue - here they are:

Special Short -Short Issue # 9

First Place: ***Uncrossed Stars*** - **Nathan Long**
Second Place: ***The Lesser Twin*** - **Elisabeth Waters**
Third Place: ***Painted Lady*** - **Susan Johnson**

4. Roadkill- Mercedes Lackey
5. The Room with the Moa that We're Not Supposed to Write About- K. Huebner
6. The Dancer of Chimaera - Diana L. Paxson
7. The Question-D.R. Parent
8. The Worgs-John F. Moore
9. N-sisti's Solution - Lynne Armstrong-Jones
10. The Lucky Leprechaun - Mark O'Connor

Hallowe'en Issue #10

First Place: ***What A Wizard Does*** - **Janet Kagan**
Second Place: ***Satanic Versus...*** - **Mercedes Lackey**
Third Place: ***A Dollar For Your Soul*** - **Earl Vickers**

The Robber Girl, the Sea Witch, and the Little Mermaid's Voice

by Phyllis Ann Karr

There was the time I made a friend out of a little opera singer.

Say, "opera singer," and people think of a large body standing in the middle of the stage singing arias and duets with other large bodies. But my friend was only in the chorus, with a body not much bigger than a child's and a voice not much bigger than her body, although it was a good, sweet little voice, and earned her just about enough money to put a little roof over her head and a little porridge in her bowl.

The way I befriended her was by putting my pistol to the head of a rich young rogue who tried mistaking her for another kind of woman one night on her way home from the Opera House. I helped myself to his purse for my pains, and gave him a kick into the bargain, which may have helped teach him his lesson. Or maybe not — some people never learn a thing. I went away and spent his money somewhere else, but not before taking the time to see my new

Robber Girl

little friend home safe and promising to look her up if I ever came back to her city.

I found myself back in her country after about a year. During that year I had had adventures, and I was carrying three prize new possessions in my pockets, along with a comfortable supply of money.

I had robbed a rascally magician and in his wallet, along with his coins, I found some lotion in a vial just big enough for the label that read, in tiny handwriting: "To See Spirits, One Drop On Either Eyelid. To Hear Spirits, One Drop In Either Ear. To Talk With Spirits, One Drop On The Tongue." There was so little of the lotion that I hadn't tried it yet.

Then I'd been on a ship that was attacked by pirates. When they boarded, I kept them off with my pistols until a fellow passenger and I got clear, and he was so grateful he gave me one of the necklaces he had that a great wizard had made for him out of seahorses' eyes and fishes' gills. Whoever wore one of those necklaces could breathe under any amount of water, so we were both able to swim ashore, stopping on the bottom whenever we needed a rest.

The last of my prizes was a pack of cards. Not just any cards. Oh, no! Every court card had the face of some famous personage, and all the faces could sing and talk. Those cards could always win for anybody they happened to like, and the only reason the gypsy whose mother's they had been let me trade him two horses — I had three at the time — for them was because they had taken a dislike to him, and the king of clubs was missing, besides.

Well, when I got back to her city, I found my friend the little opera singer flat in her bed, with a doctor bending over her.

"She has been very, very sick, this little one," he said, "but I think that at least she is on the mend. Only providing, however, that she has good food, warm blankets, and the will to get better."

"Why shouldn't she?" said I, thinking that everyone always has plenty of that kind of will.

"You see," said the old leech, "her voice is gone. She can whisper, yes, and with time and good nursing she may someday be able to murmur a little, but I fear she will never sing again."

With that, he left some medicine and went off on his rounds of other patients.

As I said, my purse was pleasantly heavy just then, so I went out and bought food for her bare cupboard, a couple of bottles of good wine, two goosedown featherbeds and a supply of wax candles. When I got back, lit the candles, propped my friend up for dinner, and wrapped her in one of the featherbeds, I saw she was crying.

Her tears rolled down all the time I fed her and got wine and medicine into her, and at last she whispered to me, "You might as well have let him have his way with me last year. Without my voice, it is the only way left for me to earn my living."

"Stuff and nonsense!" I told her.

"No, it isn't," she whispered back, shaking her head weakly. "I don't have the legs for ballet, or the fingers for sewing, and I'm not like you, to live by my wits and hardiness. I have only one thing left to sell, and...I think I would as soon be dead."

That sent a chill through me, but I told her things would look better in the morning, and she wasn't to be a little fool in the meantime. Then I got a sleeping draught into her, laid her down and tucked her in snug as a caterpillar in its cocoon, and hoped she'd have good dreams. And then I wrapped myself up in the other goosedown featherbed and settled in to keep watch.

I got out my talking cards to play a little patience, but they grumbled so loudly at the splinters in the table and the dumb, "plebian" king of clubs I'd put in from another pack, that I was afraid they'd wake the little sleeper up. So I put them away again and let the bottle of wine keep me company all alone.

Back when I was just a robber brat I had learned that getting drunk can be dangerous, and that taught me how to make a good friend of wine by sipping it just a little at a time. No, it wasn't the wine that made the air in the garret room shimmer around us towards midnight. It wasn't the wine that made the candle flames curtsey like tiny dancers in flowing silk skirts, or that seemed to brush the cracked window pane from the *inside*.

I've hobnobbed with Death in person — I can tell when the air is full of something not quite canny. Deciding it was time to try my lotion, I put a drop on each of my eyelids, one in each of my ears, and one on my tongue.

No, it wasn't canny, what was in that little room with us; but it wasn't frightening, either. Over my singer's bed a fair young woman was hovering, so beautiful I might have thought she was an angel, except that she had no wings. In fact, I can't say for sure whether she had a real body, or just a long gauzy robe that flowed like the candle flames. It seemed to be flowing around limbs and a trunk, as fine as anybody could ever imagine, but it was as transparent as her face and hands and long lovely hair, and I couldn't see anything through the gauze but the shadowy garret walls. What she was, was a glowing outline against the beams and shadows and flaking whitewash.

She was stroking the sleeping girl's forehead, and smoothing the pillow in its worn, patched pillowcase.

"Hello," I said softly, standing up but feeling quiet. "You haven't come to take her, have you? I'll give you a fight if you have."

The spirit looked at me and shook her head. "No — to give her all the help that lies within my power to give. How is it that you can see me?"

I showed her the lotion. "But who are you?" I asked.

"I am one of the children of the air," she replied, still stroking my friend's forehead. "We go wherever we can, bringing fresh breezes, soothing dreams, and every other healing thing we can. In this way, we earn souls as immortal as those of human beings."

"It isn't a bad plan," I remarked. "I know plenty of people born with souls who don't know what to do with them."

"I fear not. Whenver the children of the earth cause us to shed tears of sorrow at their naughtiness and mischief, it lengthens our time of trial. But by giving this poor child all the help that lay within your power," she added more happily, "you are helping me, also, to earn my soul and fly to Heaven all the faster."

"Oh, so we're 'the children of the earth,' are we?" I observed. When the spirit nodded, I went on, "Well, it's some comfort to know we're doing all this double good in the world, but it'll be a lot better if we can help her to some purpose. Did you happen to be here when the old leech told me about..."I glanced down to be sure my friend was still sleeping..."her voice?"

The air-child nodded again. "I used to have a very sweet voice," she mused, "or so they said. If only there were some way..."

"You've got a pretty nice voice now."

"All of the chidren of the air have sweet voices, but only other children of the air

— and folk who use magic lotion — can hear us. That would be no use to a mortal singer, but if only there were some way I could give her the voice I had when I was a mermaid, I'm sure she could go on earning her living in the opera."

"So you used to be a 'child of the sea'?" I asked

"Yes. I fell in love with a human prince, and sold my old voice to the sea witch for a draught that divided my tail into a pair of the props that humans call legs." She sighed. "He was very kind and very handsome, and if he had married me, he would have given me a soul at once."

"I think I've heard about you," I told her. "But they say he *did* marry you."

"What? Who says that?"

"Oh, people. The people who tell these tales and make plays out of them."

"But what do they say happened to the princess he really married?"

"Who? Oh, you must mean the one he almost married — the way they tell it — but you found out just in time that she was the old sea witch in disguise, out to cheat everybody."

I saw tears, transparent as the rest of her, form in the air-child's eyes and roll down her clear cheeks, like dewdrops if dewdrops could roll down a soap bubble without breaking it. "But the princess was so good and kind! It was not her fault that she had not actually been the one who rescued him from drowning, and she made him so loving a wife! They were happy together all their lives, and they always remembered me — even before they knew my whole story. And now that they are both in Heaven, they look forward to the day I join them again. How can people make up such a wicked tale about her?"

"Be careful," said I. "Lengthening your time of trial, aren't you?"

"Yes, because of the people who make up such tales! And the sea witch was surely very unpleasant, but she was fair and kept her word, and never broke it at all until my sisters begged her and sold her their long hair for a way that I could turn back into a mermaid, after all. It was a very wicked way, and I'm grateful I did not take it, but it was the only way she had it in her power to offer me. How can people twist it all around?"

"*Snip snap snurre, basse lurre!*" said I, seeing another tear ready to roll, and hoping to head it off. "It's simply the way of the world, and no good crying about it. Just tell me how to get there, and I'll go visit the old witch and see what I can do about getting your voice back for my friend here."

"But the sea witch took my voice by cutting off my tongue," the air-child said doubtfully. "I was only dreaming — I don't see how we *could* give it to this little singer, at least while she still has her own tongue."

I answered, "You can be sure that the witch wouldn't have been content to take your voice away from you if that was the end of it completely. Anyway, we can try. I think I've already had a few glimpses of your people, the time I had to swim back from a pirate attack, and I've been wanting another look at the bottom of the sea ever since, so it might as well be now, and we'll see if we can't do a good turn while we're about it."

"Oh, are you one of the people with a necklace of enchanted fishes' gills and seahorses' eyes? I heard about it from some of my sisters of the air, the ones who stayed around you when you wore the neckaces, so that you could breathe. But the sea witch is very unpleasant. Her garden-forest is full of polyps that can catch a grown merman and hold him fast, and her house is made from the bones of drowned humans. Are you sure you want to face her?"

"I've seen worse," said I. "Besides, she'll have a hard time of it if she wants to outdo my own wicked old robber woman of a mother, and I could always handle *her*, from the time she used to carry me on her shoulders. But don't worry — I'll find some honest way to get your voice back, so as not to lengthen your time of trial."

On the next day I put more drops of lotion on my eyes, ears, and tongue, and off we set. First we looked some nurses over, and when the air-child pointed a kind one out to me, I hired her to take care of the opera singer while we were gone. Then we went down to the harbor and the air-child showed me which ship to take.

We set sail late that afternoon, and that night in my cabin I tried to explain the situation to my cards. They still didn't much like me, even after I'd taken the "common" king of clubs out of their midst. But they seemed to be very much imnpressed with the child of the air, and to share my own feelings about the little opera singer, so I hoped for the best from them.

Next morning I used the lotion again, and the air-child pointed out some whirlpools in the water. I could hardly make them out, the ship was giving them such a careful margin, but it wouldn't have been any good trying to make the captain sail closer.

I took my necklace out and asked how it worked. "Does it trap the nearest one of you air-children somehow?"

For the first time since I'd met her, I heard her laugh, a cheerful, musical laugh that floated up like the lovely ghosts of notes from pure silver bells. "Trap us?" she cried. "Oh, no! It...enables us, invites us...there's no human word that is quite right for it, but, you see, if we could stay around humans under the water by our own efforts, no one would ever drown. Sometimes we can keep humans alive for a while by ourselves, but if they are too far out or too deeply under, the water forces us up away from them again, unless they have some such magic as your neckace to which we can cling."

I put it on, and she gathered herself into it. She was so close around me that I couldn't see her any longer, only sense her feelings, but overboard we went. Some of the sailors saw me dive, but I ignored their shouts, swam to the nearest whirlpool, and rode it down to the bottom.

That was a fine, exciting ride, but I would never try it again without the right kind of magic. Even with my necklace and the air-child in it, I had a hard time catching my breath around some of the turns.

At the bottom I found nothing around the whirlpools but bare gray sand. Beyond the sand was a seething black mire. On the other side of the mire, I saw the witch's forest-garden of polyps reaching out for anything they could catch in their hundreds of squirming tentacles. And in the middle of the forest, I could just make out the house of drowned people's bones, squatting in a muddy clearing.

The sand was easy to cross, so long as I watched out for the whirlpools. The mire wasn't too much of a problem: all we had to do was swim up high enough to stay out of danger from the heat. The polyps were trickier, but if the air-child had been able to dart between them safely when she was the little mermaid, I could surely do it now, especially with her riding around me to nudge me whenever one reached at me from behind, and to keep reminding me with her emotion that I shouldn't stop to tease any of them.

The sea witch was a wizened, wrinkled old thing with breasts as floppy as wet

Robber Girl

sponges, what I could see of them through the water snakes she wore in place of a robe, crawling all over her and her long, thin, finny fishtail. She was letting a little toad pick tidbits out of her mouth, for all the world like a fine lady feeding sugar to a pet canary. Her teeth looked like pearls rotted half away, gaping and uneven. I noticed that one of her upper dogteeth was missing and the other one was broken off a little shorter than the teeth around it . The room she sat in had no roof, I suppose the better to catch bodies and things when they came drifting down through the water.

"If you were a child of the sea," the witch said, with a glance at me, "I would know exactly why you have come. Since you are a child of the land, I don't, but it must be a very foolish reason, for you to put yourself in so much danger."

"You don't frighten me, old witch," I told her. "If it got around that you killed people who came to you, nobody would ever come again, and then where would you be?"

Where I am now, " she answered. "In the middle of my forest of dangerous polyps that keep me safe from most intruders. It is they that you have to fear, more than me. But do you think I care whether anyone ever comes to me or not?"

"Yes," said I, "I think you do. If they didn't come to buy help from you, where would you get your little treasures? Like that pretty rug woven from mermaids' hair on the wall behind you?" I guessed it was the hair the little mermaids' sisters had sold her. "Or somebody's sweet voice?" I went on.

"Ah! So you've heard about that, have you?" She gave her hand a languid flip, and the toad somersaulted a little distance away through the water. Then she shook off some of her snakes, reached out, and took a scallop shell down from a niche that was made out of somebody's old shoulderblade. She opened the shell like a box, and it sent out a soft ruby glow. A jewel lay inside it like a pearl — a great red jewel shaped something like a long little heart — and when she picked it up, it began singing in a voice so sweet that the toad swam to my knee and nuzzled it like a trusting puppy, and I didn't even feel like tweaking the web between its toes.

The air around my head thrummed as I felt the air-child remember the voice that had been hers when she was the little mermaid.

"This is the prize of all my collection," the sea witch said. "Once it was the voice of the sea king's youngest daughter — her little tongue, and if you or anyone else were to put it in your mouth and suck it like a piece of candy until it dissolved, it would become your voice.,"

"Really?" I asked, thinking how simply that solved one of our problems. "Why haven't you ever done it yourself, then?"

She laughed. "Becuase I like my own voice the way it is, harsh and scratchy."

"The better to frighten your customers with."

She cackled and nodded. "I see that we understand each other, you and I. Yes, and besides that, one can never hear one's own voice quite as it sounds to other ears. Keeping this as my little music box, I can always enjoy it exactly as it really is, whenever I tire of the sound of my own wheeze in my ears."

"Yes, I've heard the story," siad I. "They say that what you really wanted was the sea king's throne, and that you tempted his daughter and cheated her pitifully to get it."

"Who says that?" the witch asked curiously.

"Oh, the people who tell these tales and make plays out of them."

"What would I want with the old king's throne?" The sea witch cackled again. "Let him keep it, with all the headaches of ruling the seven seas! I do very well for myself here, thank you, letting people alone and letting them let me alone, except when they come seeking me out for themselves. I tempted the poor little mermaid, they say? Far from it, I said all that I could to talk her out of it, but she would insist on loving her prince, little as he or his fine soul were worth it. I warned her of everything that would happen to her, all the pain she would have to endure when every step she took with her human legs would feel as if she danced on knives sharp enough to make the flood flow. And I set my price so high I thought that must discourage her when nothing else did. But it did not, so why shouldn't I have reaped some benefit, where no one else did?" She touched the jewel-voice and laughed again. "So now she is sea-foam on the waves, centuries before her time, and nothing left of her except her voice."

It seemed that the sea witch knew nothing about the little mermaid's having been turned into a child of the air, and I didn't see fit to enlighten her.

She closed the scallop shell, put it back on the shelf, and chuckled, "Of course they may tell whatever lies they like, up there in the human lands, for that's the way of the world."

"Exactly what I always say," I agreed.

"Do you, now? Yes, I might expect it of someone like you. But you still don't say what you came to me for."

I whistled a few notes before I replied, "Why, for somebody's sweet voice, of course. The little mermaid's will do."

The sea witch cackled with delight and rubbed her bony hands together. "What, my prize, the prettiest treasure in all my collection? So you want that, do you? And what do you expect to pay for it, you saucy young human?"

"Nothing," I told her coolly. "I expect to win it from you with a game of cards."

"Cards? Yes, I knew what they are. And how, my chickabiddy, do you hope to play with pasteboard things here beneath the sea?"

"If you're as skillful an old witch as you pretend," said I, "you'll think of something."

She chuckled and hissed a few words to her snakes. They swam up and wove themselves into a ceiling and latticework above and around us. Then the witch puffed her cheeks out and blew. The water flowed away from us and stopped just short of the snakes, leaving us in a big bubble of air.

"I can breathe air as easily as water," the sea witch said, her laugh sounding not too much different from the way it had before, but echoing more. "Well, what will you stake against my little mermaid's voice? Your heart, perhaps?" Oh, no, she was not going to get me that easily! "The cards themselves," I answered, pulling them out of my pocket, where the air-child around me had kept them dry along with my clothes.

"My dear, packs of cards have fallen to me in plenty from shipwrecks and such."

"Yes, but cards like these?" I spread them out on a flat rock that lay between us.

"Ho-hum!" said the king of spades, who was Alexander the Great.

"Where are we this time?" asked the queen of hearts, who was Helen of Troy, pretending that I hadn't explained things to them the night before.

Looking interested, the sea witch picked them up and held them spread in

her knobby fingers. "Do you sing, too, my pretty faces?" she wanted to know.

The knave of diamonds, who was Roland, blew his horn, and they all pitched into a chorus of "The Tree in the Forest."

The sea witch nodded and said, "Yes, these are very fine. In fact, if you'd rather, I might be talked into trading the little mermaid's voice for all these cards, with one of two other little trinkets thrown in . Say, two or three of your toes. Toes from living people are rare enough at this depth."

"I can guess they are," I answered, shaking my head, "and I don't like to think what kind of witchcraft you could work with them. No, I'll just keep all my toes, thank you, and it's a game or no deal at all." If she had asked for a few coins, or even the jeweled rings and things I'd gathered over the years, I might have agreed...or then again, maybe not, because by playing, I had as chance to keep cards and all for myself, and I thought it ought to be a better chance now that they'd heard me refuse to trade them outright. After all, what card would want to risk living at the bottom of the sea?

I misjudged those cards. More self-willed and mischievous even than an ordinary pack, they were. Maybe a little spiteful, too.

I had to explain all the rules to the sea witch, of course, and its being her first game ought to have given me one advantage, anyway. And then, I shuffled long enough and carelessly enough to let my cards fall into whatever order they liked. But when I dealt them out, I got a hand that needed just one card to make it perfect...and that one card was the king of clubs!

So the sea witch won, with diamonds, and I felt a sort of sigh around my neck. It was the air-child trembling with disappointment, there in the necklace I had never taken off, even though I no longer needed it as long as the sea witch kept her room filled wih air.

I gave the cards a reproachful glance. The knave of clubs winked up at me and said, "She'll keep us safer than we ever were with you, galloping around the world the way you do.":

"We want to settle down," the queen of clubs added.

And the ace, which I hadn't even known could talk, put in, "But you wouldn't so much as consider selling us to her."

The sea witch chuckled again and gathered up the cards, because they were hers now. Fairly, I suppose, since I had played fairly, and so had she: I know how to watch for cheating and sleight of hand. But never, never trust any pack of cards!

They had continued singing the whole time we played, and they sounded as fine as any chorus I ever heard in the Opera House, I'll say that for them. "I might still sell you the little mermaid's voice," the sea witch said, "now that I have all these others..." and she ran her fingers lovingly over the cards, who purred like contented old cats.

"Not for my toes," said I.

"Well, well, what else, then? Looking me over as if she found it hard to make up her mind — and I'm sure she had it already made up by the time we'd started our game, the old sea-biddy! — she said at last, "Your necklace, then."

"What, this old thing?" said I.

"Old things are sometimes best," said she. "And, looking at it, I think we should agree that it belongs down here. Only I warn you: first you must put the necklace into my hand, before I put the little mermaid's voice into yours."

I hesitated a long time, pretending to finger the necklace that had let me find my way to her alive. Even if she knew that, did she know how it worked?

"You want my necklace, do you," said I at last, "to make a dry space for the cards? where they'll never be in any danger of the water breaking in on them." Of course she knew I must have *some* kind of magic in order to be here alive, and I wanted to pay the cards back by making them nervous. The sea witch's leathery old skin was drying out and cracking in the dry air, so I knew she would have to let the sea water flow back in around her soon. "But I won't let go my end of the necklace," I went on, "until I can put my fingers around the shell with the little mermaid's voice in it."

"I agree to that." The witch cackled again. "But when once our bargain is completed, if you should drown on your way up, my snakes will bring you back to me, and I will keep your body and the little mermaid's voice, too."

"In that case," said I, "You can make a box out of my skull and keep the scallop shell between my jaws. But once we start, it's only fair to finish the trade as fast as we can."

I'll say this for the old sea witch, that she never made the least attempt to cheat me. She made her own rules, and they might be loaded in her favor to begin with; but once she stated them, she stuck to them fair as Justice — and it's not very often you can find *that* in the world!

The moment I had the scallop shell tucked in my pocket, and she had the necklace wrapped around the cards, she snapped her knuckly fingers, the snakes whisked themselves out of their lattice-work, and the water clumped back in on us like an avalanche rushing from all sides at once — from east and west and north and south and up from beneath as well as down from above — and the force of all the other directions shot me up and out of her house in spite of the force from above.

Well, I wouldn't have been able to get out of there through dry air, anyway. But I was sorry to miss seeing whatever happened to those cards. Because, you see, the air-child stayed around *me*. As she had explained to me in the ship, the necklace didn't bind her, but only enabled her to stay with its wearer if she chose. I never knew if there was another air-child in the sea near the witch's house, or if any of them would have considered it a good deed worth doing to keep that pack dry; but I doubt it. Maybe the sea witch used more of her own magic in time. Meanwhile, I had problems of my own.

Instead of going back the way we had come, I was trying to bob straight up for the surface. We couldn't avoid the polyps that way, however, the hungry forest arched high over the house made out of dead folks' bones, its black branches rising up around us on every side, flowing back and forth every way in every current, and snapping their thousands of pods at us. They couldn't have held the air-child — she seemed to be having a hard time staying with me anyway — but one of them just touched my hand and grabbed it tight enough to leave an ugly red patch when I yanked free. If enough of them had gotten a real hold, they could have kept me there until the snakes came to collect my bones for the next room the sea witch wanted to add to her house., That is, if the snakes themselves dared swim up between those sticky dark branches. If everything the polyps caught didn't just stay wrapped in their coils until they let it go of their own accord.

I'm sure they would have gotten me

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Robber Girl

half a dozen times from behind, if the air-child hadn't watched my back and nudged me like a tiny puff of breeze hinting me away from the long strands whenever they reached out for a shoulder or piece of neck. Between that and filling my nostrils, she must have had harder work of it than I did, and I wasn't exactly lazing my way up to the surface. If every now and then she slipped and floated a short way away from me, like a huge, ghostly bubble, before she could catch her balance and get back around me again, who could blame her, poor child? Not I! Not when I stopped gasping, anyway.

Why make a longer story of it? Once out of range of the witch's forest-garden, all we had to dodge was a shark or two, and eventually a big sea turtle slipped up beneath me, took me onto its back, and brought me the rest of the way to the surface.

By now the lotion was pretty well worn off or washed away, but I had just enough left in the bottle for a drop on my right eyelid, one in my left ear, and one on my tongue. There was my air-child, gasping a bit herself after her exertions, and whispering in the turtle's ear.

Then she turned to me, her face all radiant, and sang, "Oh, thank you, thank you! Such a deed as this is worth three years to me! But how could I have done it if I had not grown up a child of the sea? And how would I ever have become a child of the air, if it had not been for the sea witch – even though she did not mean it. But you have meant a good deed all around, and bless you for it forever!"

The blessing might prove useful some day or other, but for now a dry ship and a good meal would be handier. I remarked as much to her, and, sure enough, in a few hours, with the air-child scouting ahead and the turtle swimming diligently after her, we found a ship heading back to the city we'd come from the day before. The air-child gave me one parting kiss on the forehead, but naturally none of the sailors noticed it as they hauled me aboard; and that was the last I've ever seen or heard of her, until and unless I can find more of that lotion. But by then she may be in Heaven.

I got back to the city and gave my singer the little mermaid's voice, telling her it was a throat lozenge from a physician who was too rich and famous to come calling in person. She sucked it down, and afterwards said he must be the most wonderful physician anyone ever heard of, for giving her a remedy that brought her voice back better than it ever was before.

She doesn't sing in the chorus any longer. Now she is a famous principal with the opera, standing up in the middle of the stage singing arias and duets, and her body has even started plumping out with all the good food. The last time I went to see her sing, I got so boisterous with my applause that the management threw me out of the Opera House. They said I had no knowledge of how to appreciate fine music. Snip, snap, snurre! it's the way of the world. ❧

Marion Zimmer Bradley
TALKS TO WRITERS

Writing---at least the kind of writing I do---is not self-expression at all; though I often think that a certain kind of New Age twit thinks of it only that way.

"How fortunate you are," they say, "to have a field of work in which you can express yourself." At which point I want to swear.

I'm here to say that if I wanted to express myself I'd be a psychiatrist---or, more likely, a psychiatrist's patient. The same applies to all the New Age articles about how you should write without thinking and without the brain censoring what you write; one of the first things you have to learn to do is think about what you are writing.

What is writing if it isn't self-expression?

It's communication.

I can't possibly express this too strongly:

COMMUNICATION.

So start learning to communicate.

If I had a nickel for every callow neo-writer who has lisped at me, "But you just don't understand..." Damn right, kiddie; it's not my business to understand, it's yours to make yourself understood; so start communicating yourself to me.

After all, of your own free will (nobody told you not to be a plumber) you chose the communication business; so communicate.

Now that I've gone that far, let me backtrack a little: writing is, in one way, self-expression, disciplined and mindful; probably the best form of self-expression ever invented. I never know what I think until I write it down. I often say to a budding writer, "If you want to express yourself, keep a diary. It's the best means for getting in touch with the self." But no one but yourself---or your psychiatrist---is much interested in the intricate workings of your mind. On the other hand, if you really don't want to express---to reveal---your innermost feelings, don't be a writer; because you cannot keep from expressing yourself. You can, of course, choose to reveal as little of yourself as you like---but you do it at the expense of everything that gives your writing life. The monster has to be fed with your own blood and guts.

I remember once reading---it was in Kathleen Winsor's STAR MONEY---"writing was a relentless process of self-discovery"---and not believing it then. That's why I started writing science fiction and fantasy: I thought I could write it without bleeding onto the page. I found out before I made my first sale that it can't be done. So be brave. Bleed. One of the best things you could read at this stage is Stephen King's MISERY. A good friend of my older brother---two of my brothers are also selling writers---said he could not read MISERY because it was too painful a picture of a writer's life. I am in general not a great fan either of Kathleen Winsor or of Stephen King; but I recommend these two books without hesitation to would-be writers. Writing is an endless process of self-discovery; and no matter how you try to conceal it in fantasy, if you can't stand the heat you get out of the kitchen. If you don't want to reveal yourself to anyone with the price of a paperback---you'd better be a plumber. What can you surmise (a dangerous game, but literary people have been doing it for centuries) about Shakespeare? Or---coming closer to home---about Anne McCaffrey---just from their books? Or about me?

Look in that magic mirror fearlessly enough and you'll learn a lot---about yourself. Kitty Kelley's "unauthorized biographies" tell me more about Kitty Kelley than they do about Frank Sinatra or her other victims.

I don't expect you'll believe me now. Much of education, after all, is finding out for yourself the hard way what everybody else has been trying to tell you all along.

A few more things while I'm trying to teach you things you're not ready to learn; things I found out the hard way. Maybe the first thing is, don't try to tell everything you know in a workshop story; write something for it that you have gained enough distance to look at critically and dispassionately and can tinker with. Put your life's blood into what the editor sees; but for your fellow writers where we're all in the same boat, select something you can cut and paste without bleeding from every vein; grow up, and develop a professional attitude.

Sometimes you can't grow up that much; I still remember when an editor I otherwise love and respect cut me to pieces at a public restaurant over THE FIREBRAND. He was wrong; but I never have done business with him since. I have since learned that this editor---after a death in his family, and out of his own pain---has gone systematically about alienating all his writers and has finally alienated some very hard-to-alienate ones; but I still won't do business with him.

Two more things: if you get a rejection, your story will sell sometime---if there is a market for it, and if you really think it's right---and there comes a point where you know. Just try another editor. He or she just doesn't appreciate your genius (and doesn't deserve it). But consult someone. Don't behave like a bear with a sore tail. Because, as someone---I think it was Don Wollheim---said once, "No one wants to hurt a bear with a sore tail. But they don't want to buy his manuscripts either."

Writers Talk Back:

We noticed that there are a number of letters to the editor specifically related to writing, rejection, etc., and may not be of general interest to our readership as a whole, but may be of interest to our writers – so here it is: a column just for you.

REJECTION LETTERS...

Jim Guilford
Troy, New York

First, let me say that I really enjoy reading your Fantasy Magazine and I look forward constantly to the next arrival. I especially like the way you slant it towards novice writers.

As it is, I happen to be a novice writer, and I've submitted several stories here. I am somewhat confused about one aspect of the rejection letter, though. In the body of the letter, there are usually some things that point towards the submitted story directly, other than just listing the title on the first line. But then at the bottom, there is a disclaimer that this is a form letter.

I am confused how it can seem so personal and yet be a form letter at the same time. Do you have many form letters for many common occasions and just pick one that seems close to your intent (merely adding the name, address, and story title)? If this is so, then I wonder how much faith I should put in different aspects of the letter? For example, my latest rejection letter said, "You write very well, and this story is well plotted, but ..." Should I take that as an accurate rejection of the story I submitted, or is that merely some sugar-coating that goes out with every version of this form letter? I greatly appreciate any feedback you can give me (negative is perhaps more useful, although positive helps the psyche), but I have to wonder how much of it is accurate and how much a manifestation of the form letter.

In any event, thanks for the comments you've given me so far and the magazine that I enjoy so much.

Computers are wonderful--I have about 32 rejection paragraphs. Alas, the most common is "does not fit our guidelines." A story can be wrong for us in about 32 different ways. But there's no excuse for submitting to me, say, a spaceship story--yet I get 30 or 40 a month. --MZB

Dear Jim,

I'm afraid I'm guilty for the "sugar coating". It seemed to me that rejection letters could at least be polite. -jlb

Need More Like You...

Laurie A. Borton
Cuba, New York

I am writing this letter for three reasons. The first is to request a copy of the Writer's Guidelines for your magazine. The second is to request the same for the upcoming Sword and Sorceress. I hope one envelope is big enough for both.

My third reason is simply to rave about the magazine. I love it! My husband discovered it in a shop in Buffalo and brought me three back copies. It took a single letter to persuade my aunt to give me a subscription for my birthday last fall (actually, she said that magazine subscriptions make good aunt-type birthday presents!). The latest issue arrived yesterday, prompting my husband to say that at least I'd have something to read for an hour. Although I don't read quite that quickly, I will finish it this afternoon and then have to hope I can survive until the next issue. Thank you.

Well, thanks. You'd better survive. We need ten thousand like you. --MZB

Why Write?

Barbara Rosen
Brooklyn, New York

In response to David Godwin's letter, I would imagine that *all* writers are avid readers.

I don't know why some readers also write. I've written for my own pleasure ever since I can remember, but most people don't set pen to paper unless they have to.

Exactly four summers ago a couple of friends invited me to a private workshop–just the three of us–to write and critique each other. Writing fiction was such grand fun that I found it addictive and kept going long after my friends discovered other things to do with their time.

I think the *real* question is not, "why do people write?" But "why do people attempt to *publish* what they've written?" Probably (I guess) because the person unfortunate enough to turn out "wretched dreck" is generally the last to know it. *He* thinks it's *good*. And the only way to share it is to send it off to be published. Isn't it supposed to be a sin to hide your light under a bushel? Hm?

Best of Luck...

Bob Liddil
Peterborough, New Hampshire

Dear Jan,

I am so sorry to have heard that you are leaving MZBfm. Your time with the magazine has made me feel as though I were one of the family and your encouragement caused me to continue writing through countless rejections. The relationship between editor and writer is hard to pin down. To me you have been friend, confidant, lion tamer, mom, and tireless advocate of better writing. I am sad to see you go. Best of luck in your new and exciting future.

Dear Bob,

Thank you. It's been a pleasure working with you and all the other writers that I have come in contact with during my tenure here. It's hard to believe that we have published over 125 authors already! I'm sorry that I did not get a chance to contact those of you personally who helped me so much in learning this job. I really enjoyed editing and I'll miss you all. –jlb

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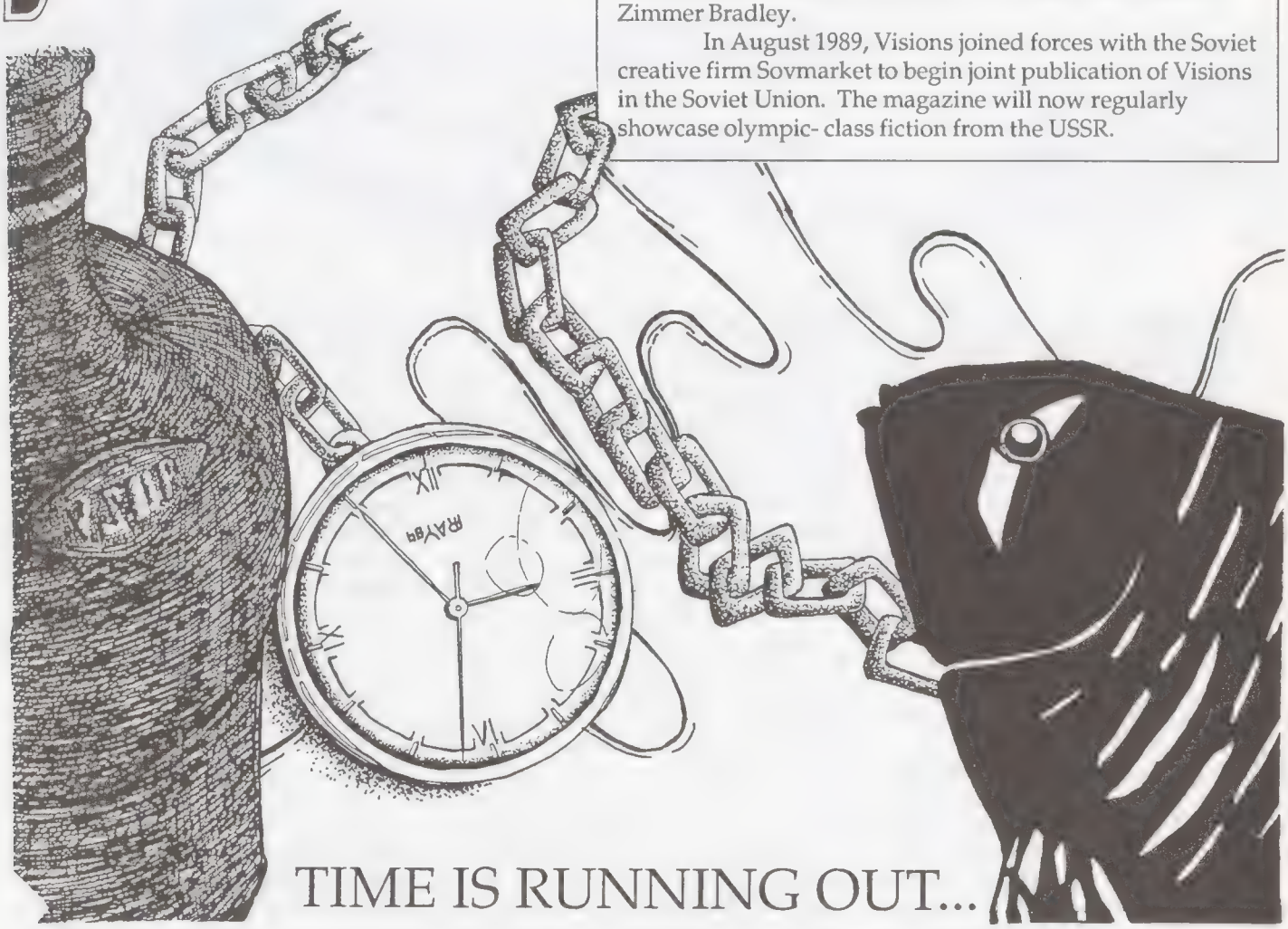

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BEFORE NO. 1 ISSN 0899 - 4919

Jilka and the Evil Wizard

by David L. Burkhead

"Damn," Jilka said. That was the second time her firestarter spell had failed.

She tried once more. She spread her hands over the small pile of brush, focused her mind on an image of the proper mystic sigil, spoke the word of command, and rapidly snapped downward with both middle fingers and thumbs, leaving the other fingers extended. The brush sputtered a bit. A small light glowed, then nothing. The brush remained cold.

"Damn and damn," Jilka said, "I guess it will just have to be the old- fashioned way."

She rummaged in her pack for a moment, coming out with a cottonwood board. A row of holes had been drilled partway through the board along one edge. Notches had been cut from the edge of the board to the centers of the holes. Beside the board, she laid a wooden stake, about a foot long and as big around as her thumb, a stone with a small hole drilled about halfway through it, and a two-foot-long bow strung with rough cord.

Jilka took a handful of the lightest, dryest, smallest pieces of the brush and rolled it between her palms. When it was thoroughly fluffed to her satisfaction, she placed the bundle so that it was half covered by the board and under one of the notches. She rubbed the pointed end of the stake along the side of her nose for a moment then placed it, pointed end up, in the hole with the notch that opened on the brush. Next she wrapped the string of the bow around the stake twice and placed the stone over it. Holding the stone and applying pressure to the stake with it, she ran the bow back and forth, whirling the stake rapidly in the hole. Soon smoke began pouring out of the hole in the cottonwood branch. When it was smoking to Jilka's satisfaction, she removed the stake and dumped the black powder that had formed in the hole into the bundle of brush. A few seconds blowing and it was aflame. It was then the work of but a moment to transfer it to the larger pile of brush, and she had her campfire.

She dug further into her pack to find her rations. Dried meat and fruit was to be her dinner, rounded out with some tubers that she had found that would go well roasted.

Once the tubers were roasted, spitted on a long branch above the fire, and Jilka was gnawing on tough, dried meat, she had time to brood.

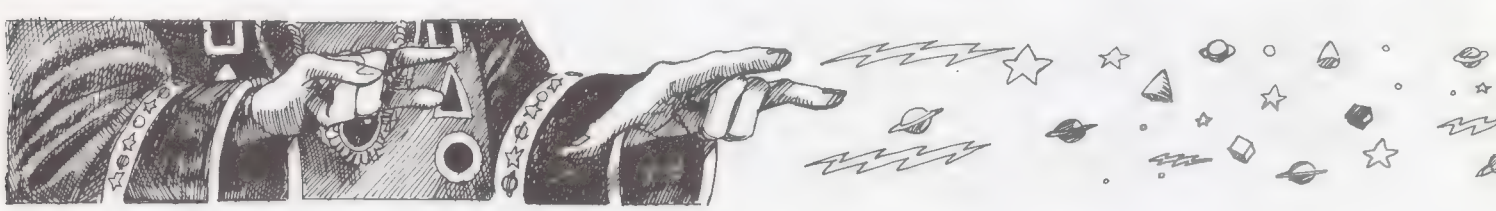
"Master Carolus?" she told the winds, "why did you release me as a journeyman? I can't even do a simple firestarter spell right. I'm not ready."

She sighed. Master Carolus could do the firestarter spell with a thought, and she could not manage it with all three parts: thought, word, and deed. Those were the three parts to any spell: thought, the focusing on the mystic sigils that channeled energy into a spell; word, speaking the words of power that gave the spell its form, and deed, the gestures that directed and focused the spell.

Journeymen and apprentices usually needed all three parts to cast a spell: although often some of the spells, the simpler ones, would be so well learned that they required less. Jilka had learned the handfire spell, the only spell she had learned, well enough not to need to speak the words of power. Adepts could work magic with only two of the three parts, usually thought and deed, while the masters, such as Master Carolus, needed only one, usually thought.

And Jilka? Jilka, journeyman mage of the College of the Lady, with the single exception, could not work spells with all three.

It was not that she had not tried. Jilka had



worked long hours to master the magic spells, longer than even Master Carolus had required of her. Still, no matter what she did, the magic would not come. She had been expecting to be discharged as unfit; that would have shamed her, but she would have understood. But what he *had* done, she could not understand. He had promoted her to journeyman from apprentice. It made her want to laugh. A journeyman mage who could not work magic.

And to make matters worse, while she had been brooding, the tubers had burned. She did not know whether to laugh or cry.

And so it was that, still half starved, Jilka made her bed.

The next day, Jilka reached the village of Embron. It had a good location, where the North road crossed a fair sized river. Jilka had no doubt that in time it would become a city of some standing, but that was a concern for the future. For the time being, she would find the inn and get a hot meal where she would not have to worry about balky firestarter spells or burnt tubers.

The inn was where she would have expected it to be, next to the river. She found a quiet corner and ordered a simple meal.

It was such a shame that she would not be allowed the peace to enjoy it.

"Lady," the boy stood across the table from her.

The table was almost as tall as he was. He peered up at her with large brown eyes, rimmed red from crying.

"Oh, no," Jilka said softly. Whenever anyone addressed a mage uninvited, it was always because they wanted something. And the thing they always wanted was magic. She would have to do something about her robes. Her robes marked her as a mage, of course, and she could not have that. People would always be asking her for magic charms and spells and curses removed. Asking her, of all people. And thank the Lady that dragons were extinct or they would be asking her to exterminate them, too!

"Lady?" the boy was still there.

"Yes," Jilka said grudgingly. Well, when she had apprenticed to a sorcerer of the College of the Lady, she had taken an oath to succor those in need. She would have to try. And when she failed, well, there went any chance she would ever have of any kind of reputation, even if she *did* learn magic. She would be the laughingstock of the profession. "What can I do for you?"

"M' folks," the boy said, "Th' evil wizard took 'em. You're a sorceress. Can't you get 'em back?"

Jilka rubbed her hand over her face, pinching and massaging the bridge of her nose. Evil wizard. Why did it have to be an evil wizard? Well, at least she would not have to worry about her reputation.

"I'll do what I can," she heard somebody say and was surprised to realize that it was herself.

Jilka looked up at the tower that the boy had brought her to. Black, of course. A dim, green light glowed in one of the upper windows, naturally. She checked her preparations. They would not work, of course, not against an evil wizard, but she had to do something.

"You stay here," she told the boy.

"It's been a nice life," she said as she paused for a moment at the door.

Strangely, it was unlocked. Of course, who would barge in on an evil wizard? Powerful mages and fools were the only two categories that Jilka could think of. Well, she was not a powerful mage, so what did that make her?

There were four guards in the lower chamber. They stood and faced her with drawn swords.

"I am the sorceress Jilka," she said and struck a pose. She gestured and a ball of light appeared in her hands. That was the *one* spell she had mastered. The light was utterly harmless, useful only for finding her way around a dark room, but, hopefully, they would not know that. "Let me pass, or die," she added for good measure.

They were not buying it. She could see it in their eyes. In another instant, they would be on her. She reached into her belt pouch and grapped a handful of the powder with which she had filled it.

"Behold the dust of sneezing!" she intoned and threw the pepper into their faces.

It worked beautifully, far better than Jilka had hoped. While they were distracted by fits of sneezing, coughing, and tearing eyes, she dashed past them and up the stairs.

The wizard's workroom was on the top floor as Jilka expected. Her entry interrupted the wizard in the middle of an incantation. A man and a woman were strapped, in wide eyed terror, onto twin tables.

"What is the meaning of this?" the wizard bellowed.

"I am Jilka, sorceress of the College of the Lady," she said, "My powers have already laid low your guards. I have come for the man and the woman."

"And what do you offer in return? " the wizard fairly sneered.

"I'll let you live," Jilka said.

"You'll...let...me...live?" the wizard howled with laughter, "You? A little poppet of a girl, not a true mage, scarcely even a good apprentice. And you say you'll let me live?" The wizard was laughing so hard he could barely stand up. A moment later, and he could not stand up. He fell to the floor.

"You dare laugh at me?" Jilka shook her hands in the air and attempted to look threatening.

The wizard, if anything, laughed louder, rolling on the floor.

Jilka folded her arms in front of her, placing each hand within the other's sleeve, and did her best to look stern.

The wizard, in his mirth, continued rolling on the floor. He struck the charcoal brazier, dumping its contents.

The wizard's laughter turned to screams of agony and terror as the coals ignited his robes. Jilka stepped aside to let him pass as the flaming wizard dashed from the room and down the stairs.

"Well, what do you know?" Jilka said.

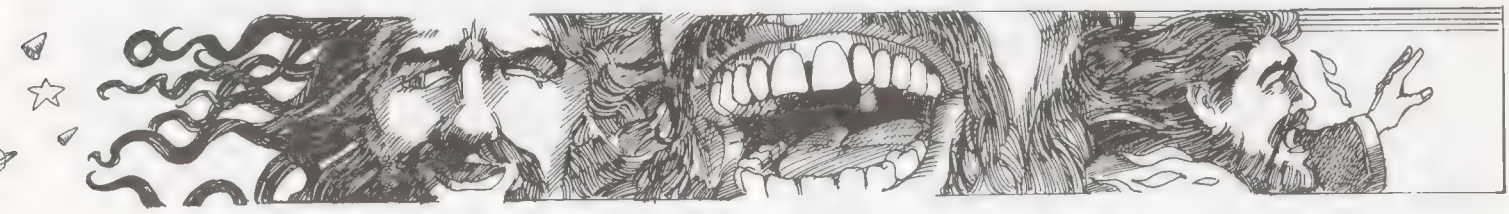
"How did you do that?" the woman on the table said in awe as Jilka bent to release her.

Jilka smiled, "Ah, lady. You know that a magician never reveals her tricks."

"Of course," the woman said in reverence, "I beg pardon for forgetting."

As the man and woman left, Jilka inspected her new tower.

"To think, all I had hoped to do was to get a chance to use this," she pulled a dagger from her sleeve, "But I never expected an evil wizard with a funny bone. Who'd have thought it?" ❧



LETTERS

More on Horror

Mary Anne Landers (Rima Saret)
Russellville, Arkansas

Thank you for the special short-short issue, and for printing two of my letters and listing me as an honorable mention. This issue (#9) contains a whopping forty pieces of fiction. Is this a record, or what?

Please allow me to express my equal and opposite reaction to Darrell Schweitzer's "Why Horror Fiction?"

Schweitzer defends horror fiction as an art form and explains how a genre which deals in the most terrible aspects of life can result in an agreeable aesthetic experience. So far, no argument; but he overgeneralizes when he claims, "We like to be scared." Some of us don't enjoy it, and not because we're squeamish.

Rather, it's because we face more than enough horror in the real world. If I were to read horror fiction, it'd be like a mailman going for a walk on his day off. It doesn't produce a catharsis in me because reading about ghastly goings-ons can't exorcise my fears. The causes of disorder in the universe are too real; only real action can stop them. According to his viewpoint, horror writers are fiddling while Rome burns, readers are listening to the music, and publishers are collecting the admissions.

Schweitzer writes that the emotional power of horror fiction lies in the stipulation that "the whole situation is a violation--physical, scientific, moral--of the way we think the universe ought to work." But some of us already believe the consensual view of universal moral order is false. Wouldn't that make horror stories based on the moral disorder concept sort of like preaching to the already converted? As for works revolving around violations of physical/scientific order, they really represent science fiction rather than horror, in design if not necessarily in intent.

In short, I fail to buy the idea that scaring the reader is a worthy aesthetic goal. Therefore, if I knock the horror genre, don't chalk it up to "she doesn't know enough about it" or "she can't stomach it." My objections apply to subtle psychologically-oriented horror fiction as much as they do to hack-and-slash stuff. All this is not to imply that I think those who write, read, edit, and publish horror fiction have something wrong with them, artistically or otherwise. I'm just stating my opinion, and I know better than to assume the arrogant critical posture of "if I can't find it interesting, nobody can!"

As for my response to the stories in this issue, my favorite is Greg Costikyan's touching and powerful "Greep Bouillabaise." It fairly glows with a mythic quality that well and truly endears a piece of fiction to this reader.

Of course, all fantasy is in a sense "preaching to the converted." I don't know about you, but I find vampires very old hat, unless very well done. Of course, each of my contributors thinks his/her story is well enough done to overcome my prejudice--and I get to read all of them. –MZB

Dear Mary Ann,

I agree with you. I was always asking Darrell why anyone would want to read that stuff - so he was very happy to write it down for me. Poor Marion, she really likes some horror. I remember one day she told me that she had gotten a really good story, so I asked where it was. She replied that she had sent it back. 'Why?' She said , "because I couldn't stand the thought of listening to you groan every two minutes!" So maybe now you'll see a little more horror in the magazine – but she really only likes the creepy kind, not the kind that makes you lose your lunch. I just don't like people who hurt other people, and I don't like reading about it.–jlb

Weary of Ecologists

Phyllis Ann Karr
Wisconsin

A gimmick of which I am growing heartily weary is "The Ecology Strikes Back." If the polluting humans in Jo Clayton's "Change" had been recognizable 19th, 20th, or 21st century industrialists, the contrast between hard practicality and quasi-mystical nature fantasy might have enabled me to force myself to read on; but when I found them to be, as far as I could tell, a fantasy society, I just spotchecked three or four sentences a page and read enough of the last page to see whether the ending justified the rest of the story. It did not make me want to go back and read the whole thing, so I didn't. There may still be a place for such fiction until we stop spoiling this planet; and yet I wonder . . . how many people who refuse to be alerted by the nonfiction documentations and news reports can really be won over to the cause by speculative and fantasy fiction?

"Son of the Sun" was impressive, but I felt let down and confused by the ending. "Silver Eyes" was exquisitely written, but too preachy for my tastes; its moral also women's and '60s movements. As for the moral of "Power of the Peaks," that was just down-right deplorable. "Weal and Woe" had imaginative monsters, all right, but little apparent sense of what kind of tale it wanted to be--realistic or fabulistic. "Hubert the Barbarian" struck me as cutesy sick, like one of the grungier, more unsavory episodes of Berke Breathed's new "Outland" strip.

In deciding how to cast my vote, then, I settled on "Time to Diet" as my first choice because it is a tight-knit, amiable little yarn that knows exactly where it is going, builds its crucial plot complication on lines of strict logic, and gets the hero out of his difficulty in an equally logical and wholly satisfying way. It seems to me to follow the rules for a good short story in every way--except, possibly, for the brief change of viewpoint, and I can see why that was done and how it enhanced the total effect. For the "fat person" question: I may not be "fat," but I am plump, being about 30 pounds overweight and engaged in a Red Queen's race to keep it down to no more than that; and no, far from being insulted, I felt the story offered a hero with whom overweight people could feel an instant bond of empathy.

It was very close, however, between "Time to Diet" and "Julio's Rock." The latter is haunting, memorable, quietly shivery, and delicately told. It deserves to survive in many anthologies. Nevertheless, I felt slightly (not seriously) let down by the unresolved chord of the ending, so gave it a second-place vote.

I must confess that after a few pages of "Caela and the Demon Spawn," I was skimming it almost as rapidly as "Change." "Caela" belongs to a subgenre I don't really like, a sort of Marvel Comics treatment of gods as superheroes. But I loved the point made at the end so very much that I had to give it a third-place vote anyway. I have always been uncomfortable with the idea that all members of any sentient species or family, be they Tolkien's Orcs or Frank Herbert's Harkonnen, are automatically evil by birth; I rejoice to find I am not alone in my thinking.

Best Short–Short Ever...

Shirley V. Van Sickle
Ajo, Arizona

The voting was really tough because the entire issue was exceptional! The short-short issue was the same--outstanding! I've read a lot of magazines during the past several months but none can compare to this one for value, artwork, the look and feel and size; but most particularly for the consistent quality of writing issue after issue.

The only copy I did not enjoy or finish was the one on horror. Some of the short stories are the best I've ever read, especially *Kill Dance* and the *Adinkra Cloth*.

However, I think the very best short-short I have ever read – also from the editing brilliance of MZB – was in *S&S*. I can't recall the title and don't have the book handy but it was about drops of blood which turned to stones (presumably rubies), one of which contained the soul/name of the villain ... *The Blood Stones*?

At any rate, this magazine is my calorie-free dessert. I recently (June 90) retired from teaching and hope to write full time. I'll know I'm on my way when I can be accepted by MZB which hasn't happened yet.

However, if I keep at it I know I will get better and maybe someday ...!

Dear, dear Ms. Bradley, please continue to take care of yourself and maintain your health. Don't over-extend yourself as you are too dear to spare.

The name of the story was Blood Stones, S&S 4--*DAW 1987--one of the shortest and best stories I ever got. I'd print more like that if people would only write them. I keep hoping. –MZB*

Deborah Millitello
Brighton, Illinois

Enclosed is my Cauldron ballot for the short-short issue. Boy, did you set your readers an impossible task! How to choose favorites from almost forty stories? I did my best.

"The Lucky Leprechaun" was wonderful! Of course, I'm partial to humorous stories, but this was deliciously funny. A standing ovation to Mark O'Connor! "Kindred Spirits" was touching, warm, and made me smile. "The Question" – what a chilling story! Frightening but effective, supercondensed terror.

I also enjoyed "Rude Awakening" (Larry Hodges is fast becoming a favorite of mine), "Mathemagics", "N-sisti's Solutions", "Turbo Charged" "Uncrossed Stars", "A Disgruntled Blue Collar Worker's Cry for Help in an Unsympathetic World", "The Room with the Moa that We're not Supposed to Write About", and "Half Mercy".

Now, comments on other things. I enjoyed Parke Godwin's editorial. I appreciate your editorials and talks to writers. Like most beginning writers, I need all the help I can get. As for a review column, I'd rather not see one in this magazine. I can read reviews in Analog, Asimov's, Dragon, SF Chronicle, Locus, etc. I can't read these stories anywhere else.

Thank you for so much enjoyment. Continued prayers are coming your way from the midwest.

Angela C. Jury
Lancaster, California

Glad to hear that Marion is feeling better. Please take care of yourself. This is admittedly a selfish plea on my part since I like your writing and your editing.

Anyway, Cauldron votes included. Oh, and could you please send a "congrats!" along to Micole Sudberg? It's always nice to see a fellow Hunter College High School attendee/(lunatic?) doing well.

P.S. I really liked the short-short issue. Another vote for more.

P.P.S. A vote against reviews, unless real short. I prefer stories.

Douglas Lent
Wareham, Massachusetts

Just a quick note (and a late one at that!) to go with my cauldron votes for the short-short issue (having to select from that many stories is almost sadistic – shame on you!).

I like the Hamilton cover--much better than the medusa-ghoul for "Changes" on #8's. *(OK, I got it - nobody liked the cover for #8. I have to tell you that it was somewhat reflective of how I felt during that period of time! –jlb)*

As for stories, I really enjoyed Diana Paxson's "The Dancer of Chimaera." I agree with Marion that it captured the flavor of the science fiction of earlier years. Well done! The rest of the issue was a mixed bag, but on the whole very good.

A well-done interview with George Scithers, although it seems to have been originally meant for *Weird Tales*. Still, I got hooked on SF magazines because of his tenure at *IASFM* and it was good to hear about what he's done since. Indeed, that's why I'm a sucker for interviews in print--they give you a real insight into the people on the other side of the business from the reader. Please keep them a *MZBFM* feature.

George Scithers Interview...

Z
Hollywood, California

Thank you very much for the interview with George Scithers in your Special Short-Short Issue (Summer 90). I hope all your interviews will be as succinct and honest as this one. So many interviews ramble on and on! It was a rare pleasure to read one where the interviewer and the interviewee concentrated on truly helping the reader understand the business of writing in their particular field. This is the first issue of my subscription to *MZB's Fantasy Magazine* and I am looking forward to the rest.

Thanks. George Scithers is one of our own kind. He should be editing an s-f zine or Planet Stories type.--MZB

Impressed...

Lawrence Toush
Muskegon, Michigan

The stories, once again, were hard to rate. I just want to tell you how much I enjoy your magazine. The back issues arrived a couple of days ago and provided a pleasurable afternoon while I was recuperating from too much sun.

The first issue of your magazine I bought was strictly for Mercedes Lackey's "Nightside" as I am a Queen's Own. Impressed, I soon subscribed. I hope you're around for many renewals.

In one of the back issues you said you would give Bob Liddil's address for those of us interested in his book. I would appreciate it if you would do so .

Bob Liddil: P.O. Box 66, Peterborough, NH 03458

What you've missed...

Dear Readers,

We had a great story for you this issue, Emily Gaydos's "Why Not– –?". She actually submitted it eons ago, and it was just right for this issue. The problem was that I hadn't kept in touch with her and she thought that we didn't want it. But

the good news is that she sold it to **Amazing Experiences** now called **Midnight Zoo** for their Special Edition- December 1990 Issue. Because of the situation I had an opportunity to meet Jon L. Herron, the editor and publisher. He's doing a fantastic job, and his magazine includes Horror, Science Fiction, Fantasy and Science Fact - that issue had 228 pages! It might be of interest to you readers and writers. So look for Emily's story, and when you read it, you might want to keep this issue at hand – the art for the story is found on our contributor's pages and the announcement page!!! P.S. For you writers, the moral to this story is: before you submit your story to another magazine or publisher, write and formally withdraw it. That way nobody is disappointed.*–jlb*

"So Many Books – So Little Time"

Dear Readers,

So many books – so little time. The important thing is to read the right ones. So many books influenced me – Ray Bradbury's **Martian Chronicles**, C.L.Moore's **Vintage Season**, Leigh Brackett's **The Starmen** (it motivated me to write **Colors of Space**, my first children's book). And so many other books have influenced me. What influenced you? Would you share it with us?*–MZB*

Larry Niven
Tarzana, California

Dear Ms. Burke,

Your plea (SFWA 116) has touched my heart.

READ THIS

Dante's *Divine Comedy*, particularly *The Inferno*. Most frequently stolen story line throughout history. First hard science fiction trilogy. Today it reads like fantasy. All of the facts have changed over the past several hundred years, but the technique shines through. Get the Ciardi edition, and read the notes.

Gulliver's Travels. A course in how to be nasty.

Moby Dick. Sure, it's a big, fat book that'll take you awhile. But ... science fiction and fantasy is for people who like to play with their minds; to seize an idea and explore its uttermost implications. Melville knew how to do that, beginning with no fantasy elements at all, then reaching.

The Wizard of Oz. I seem to have based *Ringworld* on *Oz*'s plot structure. It's the immortal children's story.

Red Planet, Double Star, Time for the Stars, Citizen of the Galaxy ... You haven't been missing **Heinlein**, have you?

I can't imagine why – or how – anyone would steal The Inferno; *attempts don't usually come off. – MZB*

John Morressy
East Sullivan, New Hampshire

Reading about other people's choices for influential works of science fiction made me think about my own. I was lucky enough to come across a few of the best when I was still a child. Wells's *The War Of The Worlds* and *The Time Machine* are as gripping on the tenth re-reading as they were that first wonderful time. I can still recall being absolutely paralyzed with fear at scenes from Doyle's *The Lost World*, and delighting at the ending (although I felt sorry for that lonesome pterodactyl). Those books made me want to read more, and got me thinking that it must be great to write things like that.

Among contemporaries, I'd put Cliff Simak's *Way Station* at the top of the list. It's a beautifully conceived and structured book with a wonderful story to tell. I'd give that one to anybody who says "I'd like to learn to write science fiction." Read it, and you'll learn a lot.

Of course, I'd also recommend the whole Great Books list, to be read, studied, and re-read. That may be why people have stopped asking for my advice on writing.

Funny: you name three books (Wells and Doyle) that I couldn't read even once. I preferred Jessie Kerrush's The Undying Monster *and Dorothy Mae Ardle's* The Uninvited. *Namely--supernatural horror. --MZB*

Darrell Schweitzer
Strafford, PA

You've been asking for writers to recommend books. I'm going to skip the obvious ones. Everybody know about *The Lord of the Rings* and *A Wizard of Earthsea*. Here are some many of your readers may not know: *(Darrell has listed two pages of books, and I don't quite have space for all of them. Maybe there will be some room in the next issue for more.-jlb)*

The Unfortunate Fursey (1946) and *The Return of Fursey* (1948) by Mervyn Wall. These are among the very finest fantasies I know, hilarious and heart-wrenching black comedies about a lay-brother and early medieval Irish monastery who accidentally becomes a sorcerer and finds himself often at odds with church and state. In the second volume he gives up trying to be reconciled with the authorities and decides to become wicked. Highlights include a convocation of sorcerers in which the host, never to be outdone, tries to juggle comets. But Fursey hasn't got the stuff to be truly wicked. He cannot bring himself to murder, or even to feed his long-suffering familiar (named Albert) on blood. Both books contain much delicious satire, whimsy, and imaginative farce, but are tragic at their core. The comedy is used to make the tragedy palatable. Without it, the books would be just too bleak and shrill. The two were combined into a single volume, *The Complete Fursey* by Wolfhound Press (Dublin) in 1985. They have never been published in paperback in the United States, something of an embarrassment to the field, since Wall is arguably the best living fantasy writer. Also look for *A Flutter of Wings* (Talbot Press, 1974; short stories) and *A Garden of Echoes* (Fingall Books, 1988).

The Face in the Frost by John Bellairs. Macmillan, 1968. Bellairs is a noted children's author. This is his only adult fantasy, and it's a marvel, about two wizards on a muddled quest. It's very hard to describe to give any sense of the story's richness. I have never seen a novel which can flip-flop between humor and horror so quickly and so successfully. It achieves both, and one never spoils the other. There has been an Ace reprint of this in recent years.

Well, that wraps it up for this time. I always do the letter column last, and usually late to press. That's why there are always typos. But you're in luck; Rachel Holmen is a crackerjack proofreader. So was David Bradley, he just never got the copy.

You readers are the life blood of this magazine, so pass the word if you like it and let Marion know if there's something you don't like. Now the magazine is available to all **B. Dalton Books, Walden Books, Cole's of Canada, Little Professor**, *and several other book chains, through our distributor* **IPD.** *So please don't hesitate to visit your local outlet and ask if they are ordering it. The more the merrier! –jlb*

P.S. If anybody sees Judy Fitzgerald, tell her maybe I finally got the point - at least some of it.

At the End of the Rainbow...

Vote For Your Favorite Story

please note selection process below

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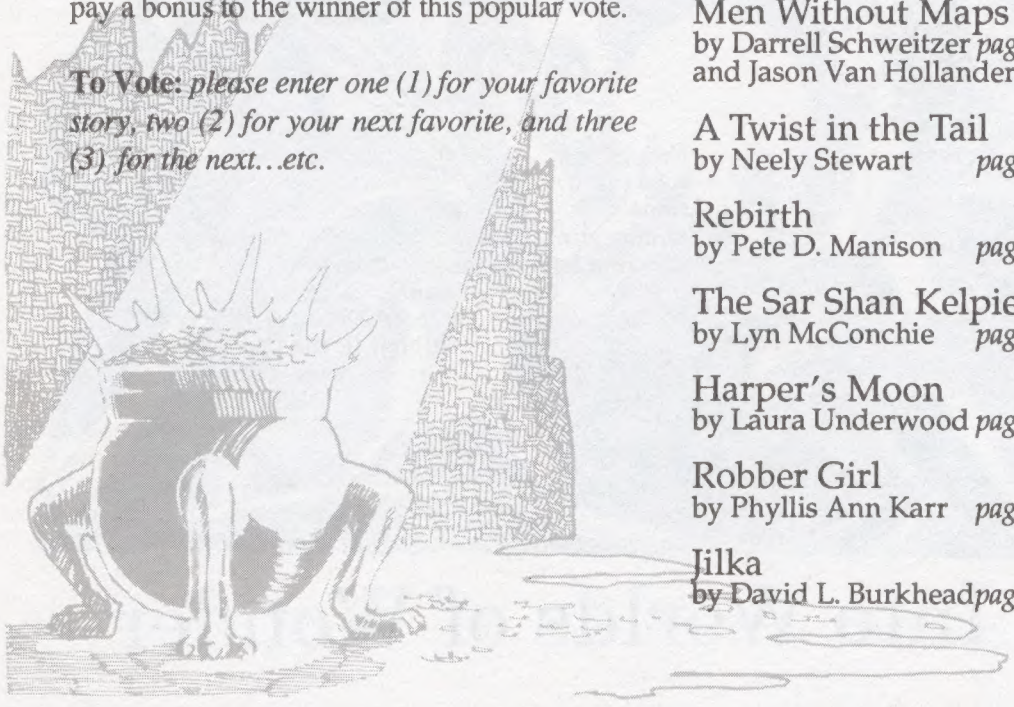

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by George Barr *page 4*

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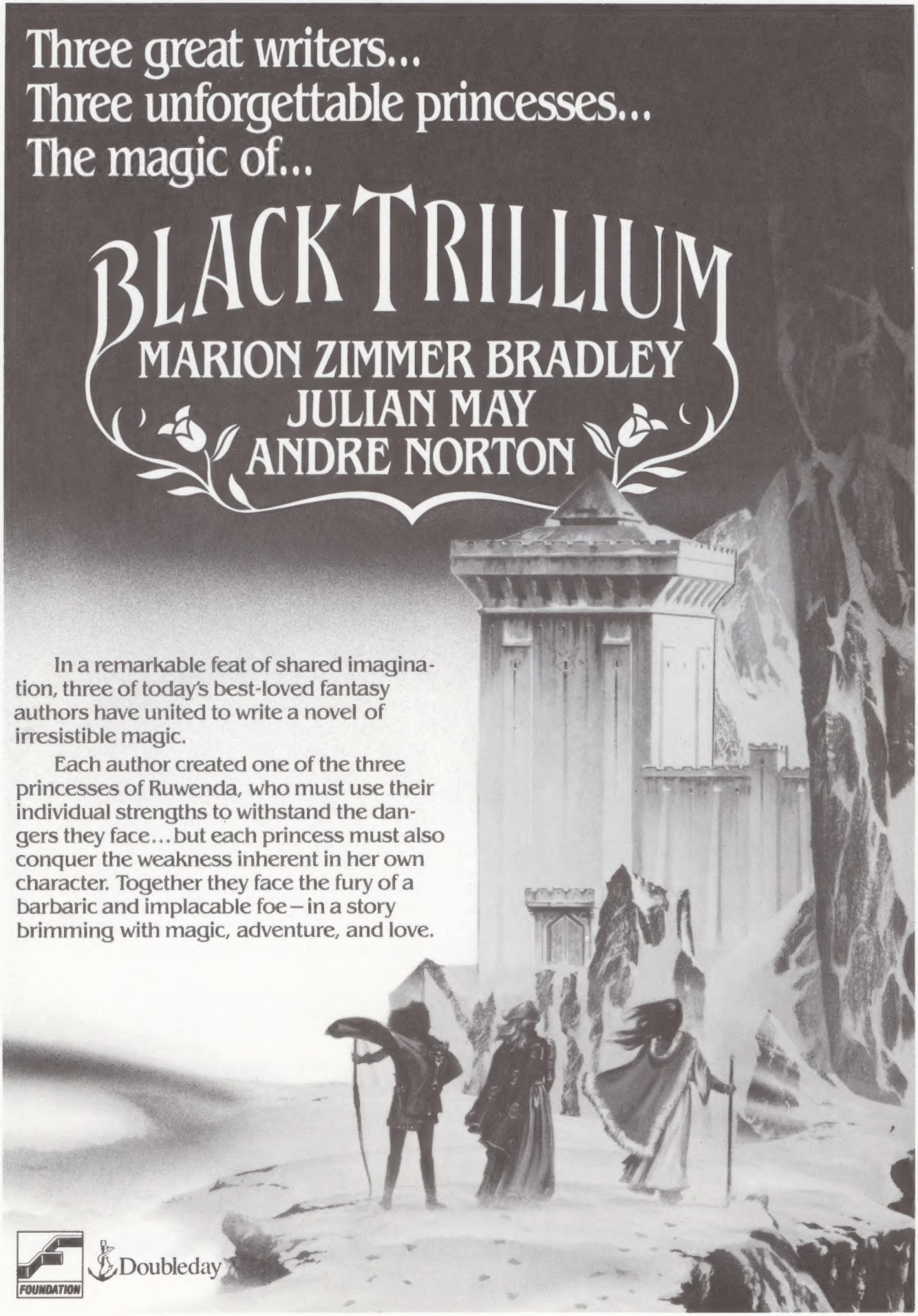

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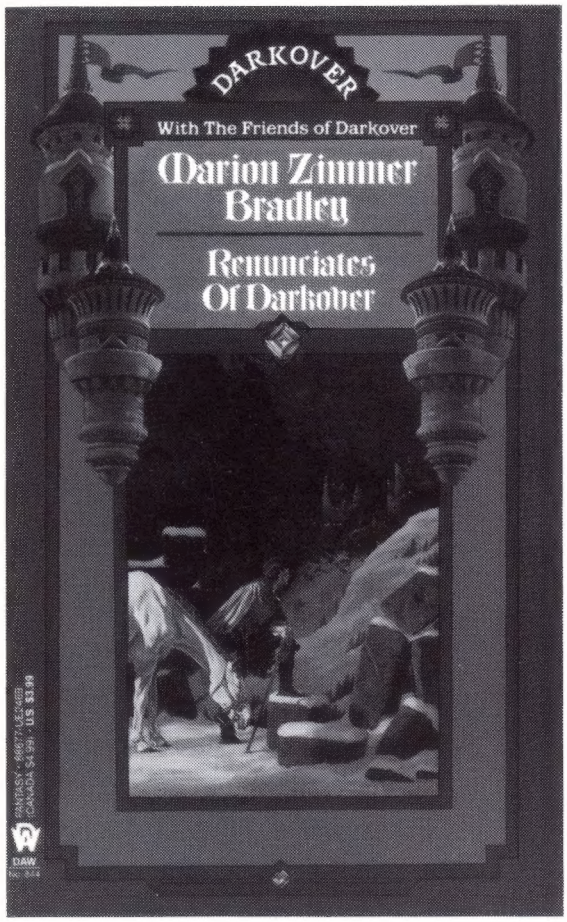

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